

## ***Ubuntu* and the Value of Self-Expression in the Mass Media**

**Thaddeus Metz**

Distinguished Professor  
Research Professor

Philosophy Department  
APK B-605  
University of Johannesburg  
POB 524  
Auckland Park  
2006  
SOUTH AFRICA

+27 79 839 2989 (cell)  
+27 11 559 2337 (office)

**Abstract**

In this article I consider what the implications of *ubuntu*, interpreted as an African moral philosophy, are for self-expression as a value that the mass media could help to promote. In contrast to the natural hunches that self-expression is merely a kind of narcissism or makes sense for only individualist cultures to prize, I argue that an attractive construal of *ubuntu* entails that self-expression can play an important communitarian role. The mass media can be obligated to enable people to express themselves since doing so can be one way for people to share with and care for others.

**Keywords**

African ethics, collectivism, individualism, relationality, self-expression, *ubuntu*

‘The realization of one’s dreams and manifestation of an idea into the tangible  
is the goal of every human being on earth’ (Ama Kip-Kip)

## INTRODUCTION

The above quotation from a founder of one of South Africa’s more prominent fashion brands is certainly false. Some people do not value self-expression, or at least nowhere to the degree that others do. However, the question remains as to whether they are making some kind of mistake in failing to value it.

In this article, I seek to answer this question from the perspective of *ubuntu*, the southern African word for humanness often used to capture a relational or communal ethic salient amongst indigenous sub-Saharan peoples. On the face of it, it appears that the value of *ubuntu* should discourage self-expression, or at least provide no reason to encourage it. Self-expression is a characteristically self-regarding, or individualist, value, famously prized by Western societies such as the United States; in contrast, *ubuntu* is an other-regarding, or communitarian, ethic that has its home amongst traditional African peoples who typically tend to deem it important to show respect for elders, to obey the dictates of ancestors and to abide by customs. Can *ubuntu*, interpreted as a foundational moral theory, make any sense of the ideas that individuals ought to seek to express themselves, even when it cuts against the societal grain, and that one proper function of the mass media is to enable them to do so?

I argue here that, in fact, *ubuntu* can make very good sense of these ideas. I contend that even though self-expression is normally understood to be an individualist value *par excellence*, it has a clear place in an Afro-communitarian ethic. *Ubuntu* as a moral philosophy can entail that, and plausibly explain why, the mass media should facilitate self-expression. Basically, my claim will be that the aim to express oneself need not be mere narcissism, as it

is often construed, but can instead be a morally important form of sharing with and caring for others.

To make this case, I start by spelling out in more detail the *prima facie* reasons for thinking that *ubuntu* and self-expression are incompatible values, clarifying what I mean by ‘self-expression’ and the like along the way. In particular, I draw on sociological data indicating that self-expression is not particularly valued in more collectivist cultures, such as those in sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern Asia. Then, I provide an interpretation of *ubuntu* that aims to highlight what is transculturally attractive about it as a moral perspective. After bringing out an ethically compelling core of *ubuntu* that should have broad appeal, I explain how it accounts for the ideas that people have moral reason to express themselves and that the mass media should help them do it, providing examples of how this could be done in a South African context.

I conclude by noting some limitations of the argument advanced here. For instance, although I contend that *ubuntu* as a moral theory provides some reason to support self-expression in principle, whether it conclusively does so in a particular context is another matter. And while I aim to show that self-expression of some kind can be justified by *ubuntu*, I do not address which particular kinds of self-expression should be prioritized, though I do close by making some tentative suggestions.

### **PRIMA FACIE INCOMPATIBILITY BETWEEN SELF-EXPRESSION AND *UBUNTU***

To express in general is to take what is inner and to make it outer. So, to self-express is to take those parts of one’s identity that are not easily or directly accessible to others and to make them more so. Self-expression characteristically consists of linguistic, artistic, bodily or other actions by which one intends to display mental states such as one’s feelings, emotions, judgments and imaginings. Good examples include saying ‘I love you’ to a beloved,

publishing an op-ed piece where one addresses a social controversy, wearing a certain shirt because it suits one's aesthetic sensibilities, and posting a photograph online because one likes it.

Part of my enquiry is whether such behaviour can have value from the perspective of *ubuntu*, but another is whether the mass media ought to help facilitate it, at least in principle. Given two equally viable ways for a media outlet to make a profit, does the fact that one would enable others to express themselves tip the scales to some extent? Or might self-expression be so important as to make it apt to sacrifice *some* profit, in the way that is commonly expected these days when it comes to providing airtime to political debates? By 'mass media' I mainly have in mind newspapers, television, radio and the internet, and my question is directed to journalists, editors, webmasters and media owners. Do they, by an Afro-communitarian ethic, have reason to enable self-expression for non-profit related considerations?

Note that the suggestion is neither that the mass media have the *primary* responsibility to foster *ubuntu*, nor that they must sacrifice stockholder interests to a *great* extent. Instead, supposing that media owners can have moral obligations to forsake profit to at least a marginal degree for sake of the public interest, does self-expression ground one such obligation by an *ubuntu* ethic?

It would appear not, from a bird's-eye view of the globe. On the face of it, self-expression as a salient feature of life belongs in largely individualist cultures, and not so much in ones that tend towards collectivism. I first explain the distinction between individualism and collectivism, where traditional sub-Saharan Africa is more of the latter, and then indicate how psycho-sociological research indicates that self-expression appears most at home in the former.

### **Individualism and Collectivism**

A culture counts as individualist in at least two major respects, namely, depending on whether its members by and large define themselves in a certain way and whether they tend to rate certain values highly. This is so according to influential anthropological and sociological cross-cultural literature, especially the work of Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kitayama (1991), Richard Nisbett (2003), Geert Hofstede and his team (2010), as well as Yukiko Uchida and Vinai Norasakkunkit (2014), from which this sub-section borrows. (A third potential indicator of individualism, of less relevance to the present issue of self-expression, is the way that people are inclined to perceive and judge, on which see Nisbett 2003, 137-190.)

In terms of self-definition, individualism is a matter of people thinking of who they are with reference largely to intrinsic properties, ones that make no *essential* reference to others. For example, it is typical for Western people to attribute their place in life to their own talents, choices, effort or lack thereof. In addition, they tend to conceive of their identity in terms of their own mental states and activities, such as their desires, likes, interests, jobs and projects. These of course *may*, and often do, refer to other people, e.g., many Euro-American-Australasians would account for their identities by mentioning the fact that they have a spouse. However, there is no necessity in a person's self-defining thoughts and actions exhibiting other-regard, and, more deeply, one's self-conception would not be understood to change depending on with whom one were interacting at a given time.

A collectivist orientation when it comes to self-definition is one in which people think of themselves as essentially being related to others in certain ways, where their identity may even be conceived to be a variable function of with whom they are relating on a particular occasion. Instead of focusing on intrinsic properties, people in more collectivist cultures focus on extrinsic or relational ones, thinking of themselves in terms of the people with whom they have related and are relating. For such cultures, in order to answer the question of who one is, people primarily appeal to roles such as being members of a certain clan, a teacher, a church

member and the like, and whom they deem themselves to be at a given time is often a function of which role they are in. On this score, Nisbett speaks of ‘the Eastern conviction that one is a different person when interacting with different people’ (2003, 53; see generally 47-77, as well as Ames 1994; and Markus, Kitayama and Heiman 1996). And when it comes to their past, what has brought them to where they are now, a collectivist culture is less likely to cite properties intrinsic to an individual, such as intelligence or hard work, but rather the support of others or luck/fate.

Given a self-definition scale with the United States at one pole and China at the other, traditional Africa is clearly closer to the latter. As is well known by African scholars, indigenous norms below the Sahara are often captured by the maxims ‘A person is a person through other persons’ (Tutu 1999, 35; Dandala 2009, 260) and ‘I am because we are’ (Menkiti 1984, 171; Nkulu-N’Sengha 2009, 143). Part of what is meant by these maxims is that one’s self necessarily depends on others.

One idea here is the sociological banality is that children cannot become normal adults on their own and require a process of socialization and caring support. Another is the metaphysical thought that we could not exist without God, from whom we have obtained our life, and without ancestors, who were the source of our clan and who even now watch over us and protect us from death and destruction. Note that *causal* claims about what brings about individual persons are what have so far been noted. Often, though, the assertions that a person is a person through other persons and that I am because we are are also meant to convey *constitutive* claims about selfhood, about what essentially makes one who one is. For example, some African thinkers maintain that to be a personal self is necessarily to be in relation to other selves, or that one’s identity as a particular person is inherently a function of the group in which one has been reared and lived (e.g., Shutte 2001, 21-25). Here, the idea is not merely that an individual relies on others’ attention, protection and the like in order to



exist, but the stronger claim that who a given individual is *just is* to be someone who exists in relation to others such as certain ancestors or a particular clan.

Turn now to the second facet of individualism, which concerns not who one essentially is, but rather whom one should strive to be, i.e., which values should orient one's life. Too often, critics of the West reduce individualism about values to egoism. However, while a consistent focus on one's own well-being is an instance of individualism, it is too narrow to deem the two to be equivalent. Instead, individualism about values is best understood as the view that many higher-order goods in life are ones that refer to an individual's intrinsic properties and make no essential reference to others.

For example, a largely individualist society is one in which people tend to deem it important to be in control, confident, autonomous or unique, and in which people are unsatisfied with their lives insofar as they fail to be. These values refer necessarily only to the individual, but notice that they are not 'selfish' in the sense of, say, a person seeking to maximize his own pleasure and engaging with others only as they are expected to be of use for that. After all, one form of uniqueness could take the (stereotypical) form of being a Gandhi or Mother Teresa.

A more collectivist culture, in contrast, is one in which many higher-order goods in life are considered to be ones that do essentially refer to others besides the individual. More specifically, it is a culture in which relationships are highly prized and deemed much more important than other considerations. It is common, for instance, for non-Western societies to value harmony, conceived in various ways (Anedo 2012; Bell and Mo 2014; Metz 2014, 2015).

This is well known to be so for those with a Chinese, and especially Confucian, background (e.g., Li 2013; Wei and Li 2013). Harmony in this tradition is roughly understood to consist of mutually beneficial unity amongst diverse elements, and as something often to be

promoted by, and realized within, hierarchical relationships of age, education and virtue. The quintessential manifestation of a harmonious relationship is that between the father and son, or between parents and their children more generally. The phrase ‘filial piety’ is used to sum up the virtue of relating to one’s father (parents), with one scholar remarking, ‘For Confucius, the paramount example of harmonious social order seems to be *xiao* (filial piety)’ (Richey 2015). Children are considered to owe their parents not merely resources such as money and material comfort, but also compassionate attitudes, a generally willingness to sacrifice their interests, and a respectful disposition (Bell 2006, 244-245; Wang 2011, 97). In turn, parents owe their children beneficent treatment. Consider that surveys asking a variety of Chinese people to rank the importance of values to them personally have delivered the result that they on average find filial piety to be the single most important one out of forty they mentioned most often, with tolerance of others and harmony itself ranking third and fourth (The Chinese Culture Connection 1987, 147).<sup>1</sup>

Once again, traditional Africa is closer to China than to the United States when it comes to values. Indeed, both East Asian and sub-Saharan African cultures are often described as ‘collectivist’ or ‘communitarian’ by the few scholars who have focused on comparing them (e.g., Hofstede et al. 2010; Bell and Metz 2011; Matondo 2012; Metz 2015). Returning to the maxims above, note that they have prescriptive senses in addition to the descriptive ones canvassed so far. That is, another part of what it means to say that a person is a person through other persons is that one should above all strive to become a *real* or *genuine* person, that is, someone who exhibits virtue (Ramose 1999, 52-53; Menkiti 2004). A true person is one who literally has *ubuntu*, i.e., human or moral excellence. Such a person is someone who lives a genuinely human way of life, who displays traits that human beings are in a position to exhibit in a way that nothing else in the animal, vegetable or mineral kingdoms can.

Although this might sound individualistic, for being focused on self-realization, what self-realization amounts to for the African tradition is characteristically relational through and through. As Augustine Shutte, one of the first professional 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).

Becoming a real person ‘through other persons’ roughly means by prizing communal or harmonious relationships with others. For some representative characterizations of such ways of relating, consider the following remarks by South African intellectuals. Former South African Constitutional Court Justice Yvonne Mokgoro remarks of an *ubuntu* ethic, ‘Harmony is achieved through close and sympathetic social relations within the group’ (1998, 17). Nhlanhla Mkhize, an academic psychologist at the University of KwaZulu-Natal who has applied *ubuntu* to conceptions of the self, remarks in his essay titled ‘*Ubuntu* and Harmony’, ‘A sense of community exists if people are mutually responsive to one another’s needs....(O)ne attains the complements associated with full or mature selfhood through participation in a community of similarly constituted selves....To be is to belong and to participate....’ (2008, 39, 40). And, finally, Desmond Tutu says this of African perspectives on values, ‘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’ (1999, 35).

In sum, traditional African culture is aptly characterized as more collectivist than individualist, when it comes to both the way people understand their identities and what they deem to be particularly important to pursue in life. Of course, African societies have been substantially influenced by other ones, especially Euro-American ones, and so the cultures of

21<sup>st</sup> century sub-Saharan urban centres are in many ways similar to those in the West. The point, however, is that *indigenous* black Africa, from which the ethic of *ubuntu* springs, is collectivist, or at least is more that than individualist.

### **Self-Expression as Individualist**

Given the distinction between individualism and collectivism, it is clear that self-expression as a value has taken root and flourished in individualist cultures much more than collectivist ones. That is, there is strong *prima facie* reason to doubt that the African ethic of *ubuntu* would prescribe self-expression.

First off, consider that the language of ‘self-expression’ is itself Western and individualist. (Indeed, conceptions of the self in psychological research generally have presumed an atomist perspective, on which see Markus, Kitayama and Heiman 1996, 860, 878-879, 884.) Above I noted that self-expression is well construed as a matter of the intention to reveal facets of one’s mental life to others. Implicit in this analysis is the notion of *oneself* as separate and hidden from others, as a stream of consciousness internal to an individual.

Now, the fact that a certain way of speaking originated in a certain worldview does not necessarily mean that it is ‘true for’ only those who share it. After all, Western chemists created the concept and language of H<sub>2</sub>O, but that hardly means those in China would be making a mistake to use it to describe what is in their lakes and taps. It is, however, telling that to speak of ‘self-expression’ suggests a certain conception of the nature of the self that is more common amongst individualist cultures than collectivist ones.

Secondly, as a matter of sociological fact, it appears that self-expression is more valued in the West than elsewhere. For example, the World Values Survey contrasts self-expression values<sup>2</sup> with survival values, which are focused on physical and economic security, and finds that African societies, along with Confucian and Islamic ones, score low

for the former and high for the latter, with Euro-American societies exhibiting the reverse orientation (Inglehart and Welzel 2011; World Values Survey n.d.; see also Kim and Markus 2002; Kim and Ko 2007).

Although I have not encountered literature on precisely *why* indigenous black African cultures tend to think of self-expression as comparatively unimportant, there is some on East Asian cultures, and, as above, they tend to be similar, at least in comparison to the West. The literature suggests that the more collectivist cultures in East Asia have tended not to deem self-expression to be worth much for two major reasons.

First, self-expression is sometimes expected to disrupt social ties, and especially to place too much emphasis on oneself as opposed to others, whose interests should take priority (Kim and Markus 2002, 437-439; Kim and Markus 2005, 185). In addition, talking is ‘an act that can attenuate hierarchy’ (Kim and Markus 2002, 440). Consider that from the perspective of the Confucian tradition adumbrated above, teenagers should above all respect their parents as superiors, which often includes showing deference and excludes expressing themselves in ways that would embarrass their parents, intimate distance from them or suggest that the concerns of others are not of crucial importance.

The second reason why self-expression appears not to be valued highly by East Asian collectivist cultures is that the most important goods, concerning harmonious relationships between superiors/subordinates, are already public (Kim and Sherman 2007, 2). If filial piety, tolerance and harmony are amongst the top values in a certain culture, then what is the point of self-expression, of bringing out one’s inner life? It does not appear to be essential for realizing any of these relational goods.

Although these studies have been about China and Japan, and not sub-Saharan Africa, the findings on the face of it seem applicable to traditional black societies there. Consider, after all, the central values listed by the magisterial historian of African cultures, John Mbiti:

(B)e 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, greet people especially those you know, keep your word given under oath, compensate when you hurt someone or damage his property, follow the customs and traditions of your society (1990, 208-209).

Self-expression does not easily fit in here.

## **THE ARGUMENT FOR COMPATIBILITY BETWEEN SELF-EXPRESSION AND *UBUNTU***

In order to show that *ubuntu* not merely permits, but encourages, self-expression, I do not engage in a social scientific survey of what traditional Africans have believed about the two concepts. Instead, I articulate those moral elements of *ubuntu* as an African worldview or way of life that would likely be found attractive to those from a wide array of cultures, and then consider their implications for self-expression.

### **An Interpretation of *Ubuntu***

Imagine an adherent to *ubuntu* addressing the United Nations. What would she reasonably emphasize as something that indigenous sub-Saharan cultures can contribute to global thought about morality?

She would be foolish to concentrate on the point that sometimes southern African peoples have thought that white people or those from other cultures cannot exhibit *ubuntu*, cannot live a genuinely human life (Gade 2012). In addition, she should not make too much of the idea that relationships with the ‘living-dead’ are at the heart of moral behaviour (as per Ramose 1999; Murove 2007); for relatively few of the world’s people think that much of day to day life consists of interacting with spirits who have continued to live with us on the earth after the deaths of their bodies.

Instead, someone seeking to articulate what is compelling about *ubuntu* as a broadly attractive ethical philosophy would be better to focus on the ideal of relational self-realization, the view that any person can in principle exhibit human excellence, and can do so by relating to other human beings communally or harmoniously. Returning to the characterizations of these relationships above, there are two recurrent themes in them<sup>3</sup> (which I initially distinguished in Metz 2007, 2011, from which the rest of this sub-section borrows). On the one hand, one finds notions of being close, participating and belonging, which I sum up as a matter of sharing a way of life. On the other hand, one encounters ideals of exhibiting sympathy, being responsive to others' needs, and sharing what one has, usefully captured as caring for others' quality of life.

An ideal of prizing relationships in which one shares a way of life with others and cares for their quality of life is characteristically African and is distinct from Western moral philosophies such as utilitarianism and Kantianism. At the same time, however, it is what makes *ubuntu* attractive to those beyond Africa. To see both points, consider that the combination of sharing a way of life and caring for others' quality of life is more or less what English-speakers mean by 'friendliness' or a broad sense of 'love'. Hence, one way to understand *ubuntu* as an ethic is in terms of a prescription to honour friendly or loving relationships. Whereas it would be common for a Western philosopher to urge friends to treat each other morally, the fascinating idea that I encounter in an African context is that what it is to treat each other morally is, roughly, to be friendly (more carefully: to respect the value of friendliness). And while Western philosophers normally cash out morality in terms of promoting well-being in the long run or treating people's autonomy with respect, they can appreciate the *prima facie* appeal of a view that places friendly relationship at the heart of morality. It is worth taking seriously the idea that actions such as coercion, deception and exploitation are wrong (roughly) insofar as they are unfriendly.

### **Deriving Self-Expression from *Ubuntu***

What remains to be done is to demonstrate how the moral-philosophical conception of *ubuntu* sketched in the previous sub-section can make sense of both why individuals ought to express themselves and why the mass media ought to help them do so. On the face of it, this is a tall order, for this conception of *ubuntu* remains thoroughly relational: one's basic aim in life should be to become a real person, something one can do only by prizing relationships in which one shares a way of life with others and cares for others' quality of life. *Ubuntu's* focus on being friendly towards *others* appears incompatible with a focus on expressing *oneself*.

In a nutshell, though, my claim is that genuinely sharing a way life with others and caring for them can often require revealing one's mental life to them. Although, by *ubuntu*, there is no reason to engage in self-expression *for the sake of oneself*, one can have reason to do so in order to relate to others in the morally appropriate (viz., friendly) manner. The following arguments are meant to show that expressing oneself can itself be part of what it is to act for the sake of others in certain ways.

Note that I aim to advance a stronger position than showing that people who prize self-expression tend also to be civic minded. Some have argued that that there is an 'association' between cultures that prize self-expression and civic-mindedness, and that the former also 'go together with' peaceful collective action (e.g., Welzel 2009). However, I try to show that, by *ubuntu*, a certain kind of civic-mindedness or other-regard includes self-expression as a component.

First, think about what it means to share a way of life with others. To truly *share* a way of life with other people requires transparency between them, a knowledge of not merely one another's external behaviours, but also their inner life. Second, consider now what it means to care for others' quality of life. Here, again, doing what is likely to make others better off can require one to *give* of one's mental life. If, by *ubuntu*, one is to donate one's



attention, time, labour and wealth, then one can probably also be obligated to make available to others one's attitudes, at least if they are insightful, creative, revealing or the like. Self-expression is a matter of revealing one's mental states, which need not themselves be strictly about the self, but can usefully be about others and the world they live in.

Or, from the perspective of thinking of *ubuntu* as an ethic that prizes friendly relationships, consider that I can hardly be said to do so with you if I am secretive about my thoughts and feelings, electing not to reveal them to you. A good friend is not merely one whom you can open up to and rely on, but also one *who opens up to you* and relies on you. Reflection on more intense instances of friendly relationship makes it clear that self-expression is central to them.

For yet another way to see why an *ubuntu* ethic can sensibly call for self-expression, consider how an African understanding of harmonious relationships differs from the Confucian, which might well not call for it. Recall above that East Asians tend not to value self-expression as much as Westerners because they sometimes interpret it to place importance on the person doing the expressing and to suggest a position of equality among subordinates and superiors. *Ubuntu* is different, in that harmony for it does not essentially involve hierarchy, and mutual awareness of one another's perspectives is characteristically required for people to share a way of life together. In addition, recall that East Asians tend not to prize self-expression because relationships of the relevant sort are already public. However, *ubuntu* is again different, in that the kind of relationships that matter for it include internal as much as external factors. It is not merely participatory and beneficent actions that matter, but also the intentions, motivations and emotions from which they spring, e.g., it is important to perform an action because one thinks of oneself as bound up with the other or because one believes the other merits help for her own sake. Still more, by *ubuntu* revealing one's mental life can be a kind of gift, when it promises, say, to broaden others' horizons, to help them

understand themselves or their society better, or just to make them feel closer to someone else. In sum, the reasons why East Asians discourage, or at least do not encourage, self-expression do not, upon reflection, appear to apply to *ubuntu* interpreted as a moral philosophy.

Note that such an interpretation of *ubuntu* and its implications for self-expression are compatible with more traditional notions, at least when tweaked in certain ways. For instance, respect for elders still makes sense, supposing an elder just is one with *ubuntu*. Treating someone as important in virtue of her moral wisdom need not prohibit or inhibit a person from expressing herself as essential to forming relationships of sharing and caring with others, while *deference* to people *merely* because of their age or authority might indeed do so.

And even the prescription to uphold customs retains a place in the present ethic. What is of value in long-standing practices such as rituals and celebrations is not the bare fact that they have existed for a certain span of time, but rather that they are expressive of, and tend to foster, people's sense of togetherness. They lack moral value when forced upon others, as in the form of clitoridectomy, but have it when they are instances of genuinely shared lifestyles. If people express themselves in ways that buck pressure to conform, or if certain traditions simply do not resonate with people anymore and will not constitute or impart relationships of sharing and caring, then the present understanding of *ubuntu* favours self-expression.

The present interpretation of *ubuntu* is a philosophical construction, and is not intended to mirror any traditional people's beliefs. However, it is meant to be continuous with indigenous African worldviews, and to cull out what is morally compelling about them, at least to a broad, multicultural readership. And *ubuntu*, *qua* an ethic of respect for relationships of identity and solidarity, appears to make good sense of why people can have reason to express themselves to others.

### **Media Obligations to Facilitate Self-Expression**

If my argumentation has been successful so far, then I have shown that an attractive morality at the heart of traditional sub-Saharan thought can entail that, and sensibly explain why, people should engage in self-expression; they should do so as ways to foster sharing a way of life with others and caring for their quality of life. I have as yet said nothing about media workers, managers and owners, however, and need to explain why they, by *ubuntu*, should help people to express themselves.

To start off, consider that, according to any version of *ubuntu*, if one is in a position to greatly help others at little cost to oneself, particularly those with whom one shares a way of life, then one is obligated to do so. Illustrative examples abound. For one, think about the adage recounted by Walter Sisulu according to which, by *ubuntu*, if you have two cows, and the milk of the first cow is enough for your own consumption, you are expected to donate the milk of the second cow to your underprivileged brother (in Broodryk 2002, vii; see also 1, 36-39). Or consider Nelson Mandela's (1996) claim that a quintessential instance of *ubuntu* is showing hospitality to those before you, including strangers who are passing through. Finally, think about the weighty duties to aid extended family in the sub-Saharan tradition, to the point where it would be considered theft, or at the very least rude, not to share (Gyekye 1997, 69-75; Appiah 1998; Broodryk 2006; Metz and Gaie 2010, 277-278).

Given that one morally has to go out of one's way to help others, how should one do so? One important way to help others is to enable *them to relate communally with still others*. After all, the very best way to help another, according to an *ubuntu* ethic, is to enable *him* to become a real person or to exhibit *ubuntu*, where such an individual is one who shares a way of life with others and cares for their quality of life. Again drawing on intuitions about how to value friendly relationships, consider that although one way to be a good friend is to make one's friend happy, another is to help her to become a better friend.

Given the premise, established above, that self-expression can be essential for sharing and caring with others, and supposing that owners, managers and editors of mass media are (at little cost to stockholder interests, let us suppose) in a position to help residents express themselves to a public audience (and thereby develop their own *ubuntu*), it follows that they are obligated to help residents in this way. In the first instance, this means giving people forums in which to express themselves, viz., airtime on television and radio, and space in newspapers and on websites.

However, it would ideally go beyond merely airing or publishing people's contributions to helping them become able to make such contributions in the first place. This is particularly true in developing country contexts such as South Africa, where economic poverty and an extremely poor education system are serious obstacles to people being in a position to express themselves. For instance, I am aware of small, community radio stations that have gone out of their way to train young people to develop stories and have lent them the equipment essential for doing so (Children's Radio Foundation 2011). I am unfortunately not aware of any large media house in South Africa undertaking such a project, when it has much greater financial, human and other kinds of resources.

Of course, a large media house can offer a person greater exposure, can enable him to express himself to a much larger audience. The point is fair. The question, though, is whether the duty to aid others to express themselves stops there, when an owner or editor could do so without much more burden to himself. How do elders of the marginalized Khoi-San peoples understand the history of South Africa and where they sit today? What if interviews with them were translated into other major South African languages and then made available on the internet or excerpts of them were published in newspapers? What are the experiences of an elderly African woman in a small, rural village, and what does she think about her grandchildren's lifestyles? What might be revealed if one gave a camera to such a person and

then broadcast some of the photos on television? How do urban young people deal with the challenge of unemployment in productive ways? What do they do that is creative, helpful or diligent, despite lacking a formal position? These are the kinds of questions that the mass media in South Africa ought to be considering, supposing they want to discharge their *ubuntu*-based obligations to facilitate self-expression.

### **CONCLUSION: WHICH SELF-EXPRESSION DOES *UBUNTU* PRESCRIBE?**

My aim in this article has been to show that an *ubuntu* ethic can entail that, and plausibly explain why, the mass media morally ought to help people express themselves to others. I have argued that, by *ubuntu*, one must honour communal, harmonious or friendly relationships of sharing a way of life with others and caring for their quality of life, where self-expression can be central to both elements. And since one with *ubuntu*, i.e., human excellence, is particularly someone who helps others to obtain *ubuntu* themselves, media owners, editors and journalists ought to help their compatriots by enabling them to express themselves, at least when the former can do so at little expense to themselves.

At best, I have shown that *ubuntu* as a moral theory can sometimes provide reason for the mass media to facilitate people's self-expression, and I have offered some suggestions about how they might usefully do so in South Africa. However, I have demonstrated neither that any particular media outlet is indeed obligated to do so, nor that one should do so in any specific way. Making the latter kinds of judgments would require a much more contextual investigation.

An additional kind of enquiry that would be worth undertaking would be to consider precisely which kinds of self-expression merit support. Can *ubuntu* account for why the media ought not to help people express racist and sexist views to the public (in a South African context, consider David Bullard's notorious article or *The Times* online readers' comments), or why it would not be important for them to help others express their sexuality

or base mores in public (e.g., Khanyi Mbau's attempt to glamourize being a sugar daddy's kept woman)? On the face of it, the idea that the media ought to help citizens express themselves in ways likely to foster still other people's *ubuntu* is promising, but merits systematic consideration elsewhere.

## References

- Ames, R. 1994. The focus-field self in classical Confucianism. In *Self as person in Asian theory and practice*, ed. R. Ames, W. Dissanayake and T. Kasulis, 187–212. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Anedo, O. 2012. A cultural analysis of harmony and conflict. *Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities* 13: 16–52.
- Appiah, A. 1998. Ethical systems, African. In *Routledge encyclopedia of philosophy*, ed. E. Craig. London: Routledge.
- Bell, D. A. 2006. *Beyond liberal democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bell, D. A. and Mo, Y. 2014. Harmony in the world 2013: The ideal and the reality. *Social Indicators Research* 118: 797–818.
- Bell, D. A. and Metz, T. 2011. Confucianism and *ubuntu*. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38: 78–95.
- Broodryk, J. 2002. *Ubuntu: Life lessons from Africa*. Pretoria: Ubuntu School of Philosophy.
- Broodryk, J. 2006. The philosophy of *ubuntu*: Some management guidelines. *Management Today* (August): 52–55.
- Children's Radio Foundation. 2011. *How to make your own radio shows: Youth radio toolkit*. <http://www.childrenradiofoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/How-to-Make-Your-Own-Radio-Shows-Youth-Toolkit.pdf>.
- Dandala, M. 2009. Cows never die: Embracing African cosmology in the process of economic growth. Repr. in *African ethics: An anthology of comparative and applied ethics*, ed. M. F. Murove, 259–277. Pietermaritzburg: KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Gade, C. 2012. What is *ubuntu*? Different interpretations among South Africans of African descent. *South African Journal of Philosophy* 31: 484–503.
- Gbadegesin, S. 1991. *African philosophy: Traditional Yoruba philosophy and contemporary African realities*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Gyekye, K. 1997. *Tradition and modernity: Philosophical reflections on the African experience*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gyekye, K. 2004. *Beyond cultures: Perceiving a common humanity*. Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy.
- Hofstede, G. et al. 2010. *Cultures and organizations* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn). New York: McGraw-Hill.

- Ingelhart, R. and Welzel, C. 2011. The WVS cultural map of the world. <http://pagines.uab.cat/seangolden/sites/pagines.uab.cat/seangolden/files/World%20Values%20Surveys%20maps%2020110606.pdf>.
- Iroegbu, P. 2005. Beginning, purpose and end of life. In *Kpim of morality ethics*, ed. P. Iroegbu and A. Echekwube, 440–445. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational.
- Kim, H. and Markus, H. R. 2002. Freedom of speech and freedom of silence: An analysis of talking as a cultural practice. In *Engaging cultural differences*, ed. Richard Shweder et al., 432–452. New York: Russell-Sage Foundation.
- Kim, H. and Markus, H. R. 2005. Speech and silence: An analysis of the cultural practice of talking. In *Beyond silenced voices* (rev. edn), ed. L. Weis and M. Fine, 181–196. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Kim, H. and Ko, D. 2007. Culture and self-expression. In *The self*, ed. C. Sedikides and S. Spencer, 325–342. New York: Psychology Press.
- Kim, H. and Sherman, D. 2007. ‘Express yourself’: Culture and the effect of self-expression on choice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 92: 1–11.
- Li, C. 2013. *The Confucian philosophy of harmony*. London: Routledge.
- Mandela, N. 1996. Experience *ubuntu* (excerpt from an interview with Tim Modise). <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HED4h00xPPA>.
- Markus, H. R. and Kitayama, S. 1991. Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review* 98: 224–253.
- Markus, H. R., Kitayama, S. and Heiman, R. J. 1996. Culture and ‘basic’ psychological principles. In *Social psychology: Handbook of basic principles* (1<sup>st</sup> edn), ed. E. T. Higgins and A. W. Kruglanski, 857–913. New York: Guilford.
- Masolo, D. A. 2010. *Self and community in a changing world*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Matondo, J. P. 2012. Cross-cultural values comparison between Chinese and Sub-Saharan Africans. *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 3: 38–45.
- Mbiti, J. 1990. *African religions and philosophy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. Oxford: Heinemann.
- Menkiti, I. 1984. Person and community in African traditional thought. In *African philosophy: An introduction* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn), ed. R. Wright, 171–181. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Menkiti, I. 2004. On the normative conception of a person. In *A companion to African philosophy*, ed. K. Wiredu, 324–331. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Metz, T. 2007. Toward an African moral theory. *Journal of Political Philosophy* 15: 321–341.



- Metz, T. 2011. *Ubuntu as a moral theory and human rights in South Africa*. *African Human Rights Law Journal* 11: 532–559.
- Metz, T. 2014. Harmonizing global ethics in the future: A proposal to add south and east to west. *Journal of Global Ethics* 10: 146–155.
- Metz, T. 2015. Confucianism in China, *ubuntu* in Africa: Two non-western value systems. In *The philosophy of Chinese civilization*, ed. H. du Plessis, ch. 3. Johannesburg: Real African Publishers.
- Metz, T. and Gaie, J. 2010. The African ethic of *ubuntu/botho*: Implications for research on morality. *Journal of Moral Education* 39: 273-290.
- Mkhize, N. 2008. *Ubuntu* and harmony. In *Persons in community: African ethics in a global culture*, ed. R. Nicolson, 35–44. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Mnyaka, M. and Motlhabi, M. 2009. *Ubuntu* and its socio-moral significance. Rev. edition in *African ethics: An anthology of comparative and applied ethics*, ed. M. F. Murove, 63–84. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Mokgoro, Y. 1998. *Ubuntu* and the law in South Africa. *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal* 1: 15–26.
- Murove, M. F. 2007. The Shona ethic of *ukama* with reference to the immortality of values. *The Mankind Quarterly* 48: 179–189.
- Nisbett, R. 2003. *The geography of thought*. New York: Free Press.
- Nkulu-N’Sengha, M. 2009. Bumuntu. In *Encyclopedia of African religion*, ed. M. K. Asante and A. Mazama, 142–147. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Ramose, M. 1999. *African philosophy through ubuntu*. Harare: Mond Books.
- Richey, J. 2015. Confucius. In *The internet encyclopedia of philosophy*, ed. J. Feiser. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/confuciu/>.
- Shutte, A. 2001. *Ubuntu: An ethic for the new South Africa*. Cape Town: Cluster Publications.
- The Chinese Culture Connection. 1987. Chinese values and the search for culture-free dimensions of culture. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 18: 143–164.
- Tutu, D. 1999. *No future without forgiveness*. New York: Random House.
- Uchida, Y. and Norasakkunkit, V. 2014. Asian versus western views. In *Encyclopedia of quality of life and well-being research*, ed. A. Michalos, 248–253. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Wang, T. 2011. Towards a proper relation between men and women. In *The renaissance of Confucianism in contemporary China*, ed. R. Fan, 91–107. Dordrecht: Springer.

Wei, X. and Li, Q. 2013. The Confucian value of harmony and its influence on Chinese social interaction. *Cross-Cultural Communication* 9: 60–66.

Welzel, C. 2009. How selfish are self-expression values? A civicness test. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 41: 152–174.

World Values Survey. n.d. Findings and insights.  
<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp>

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Industriousness was ranked second, and can also be plausibly viewed as having an other-regarding dimension, but it would take some space to spell that out.

<sup>2</sup> Which include more than just ‘self-expression’ as narrowly defined in this article, for instance, a concern for environmental protection.

<sup>3</sup> And in many other construals of African values. See also the remarks of still other South Africans Mluleki Mnyaka and Mokgethi Motlhabi (2009, 69, 71-72), Nigerians Segun Gbadegesin (1991, 65) and Pantaleon Iroegbu (2005, 442), Ghanaian Kwame Gyekye (2004, 16) and Kenyan Dismas Masolo (2010, 240).