

ETHICAL METHODOLOGY IN METZ'S THEORY OF *UBUNTU*

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ABSTRACT

In this article I apply Thaddeus Metz's ethical methodology to the ancient Greek ideal of σωφροσύνη in order to show that it generates a distorted account of *ubuntu*. If *ubuntu* is a virtue concept, then Metz's analytical method will not reconstruct it — because it fails to determine whether *ubuntu* refers to one of a plurality of fundamental virtues, the fundamental virtue, or virtue itself.

Keywords: African ethics; Ancient Greek philosophy; excellence; σωφροσύνη (*sophrosyne*); sub-Saharan morality; *ubuntu*; virtue

1.

In an influential article entitled “Toward an African moral theory” (Metz 2007a), Thaddeus Metz argues for a theoretical interpretation of *ubuntu* by application of the Rawlsian method of reflective equilibrium (Metz 2007b).¹ In the scholarship emerging in response to this paper, some commentators, notably Ramose (2007: 54), have objected to Metz's reliance on a “strictly analytic methodology” (Metz 2007c: 376) in the formulation of an African moral theory. In this paper I shall attempt to support this line of objection by showing that Metz's methodology does not properly delineate the conceptual role of *ubuntu* in African moral language.

¹ Although Metz has developed his view extensively in further writings, the core of his account appears to remain much the same as that given in (2007a).

2.

Metz's method is to begin by identifying a set of core ethical intuitions or judgments that "most friends of *ubuntu* firmly hold" (Metz 2007a: 323).² He then divides this set of ethical intuitions into two groups. The first group consists of global ethical judgements widely shared by Western people and "adherents of *ubuntu*" (324), having to do with prohibitions on theft, murder, rape, and so on (321). The second group consists of local intuitions said to be characteristic of the "largely black and Bantu-speaking" people of sub-Saharan Africa,³ and includes the wrongness of making policy decisions "in the face of dissent" (324), not upholding traditions and rituals, and failing to marry and have children.⁴

Given this presentation of the data, Metz "seek[s] a theory inspired by *ubuntu* that best accounts for both of [the] two groups" of moral judgments (323). This is to say, more precisely, that he searches for a principle that "entails and well explains" the intuitions to which the "friends of *ubuntu*" are committed (323-324). The principle sought is therefore supposed to give a rational reconstruction of *ubuntu* rather than some other evaluative concept or perspective. Metz makes this explicit by referring to an account of the ethical data as, *inter alia*, a "theoretical interpretation of *ubuntu*" (328), a "principled rendition of *ubuntu*" (329), a "construal of *ubuntu*" (330), and an "understanding of *ubuntu*" (330).

My approach in supporting the claim that Metz's methodology fails to give a satisfactory account of *ubuntu* will be to dramatise inferences parallel to what appear to be Metz's inferences in his attempt to rationally reconstruct (322) talk of *ubuntu* in four dialogues on the ancient Greek ideal of σωφροσύνη. Although the virtue of σωφροσύνη is alien to contemporary Western people (Hamilton and Cairns 1961: 99),⁵ the strangeness of σωφροσύνη is presently an advantage, since it directs attention to the *logical* relationships that obtain between σωφροσύνη and other

2 References to Metz (2007a) will hereafter be indicated in the text by page numbers within round brackets.

3 Metz explains that he is referring to "*tendencies*, not essences" (2007: 324) [emphasis added].

4 For further details, see Metz (2007a: 324 ff).

5 It is generally agreed that "there is no adequate translation [of σωφροσύνη] in modern European languages" (Cooper 1997: 639). Standard English translations such as sound-mindedness, temperance or moderation are in various ways unsatisfactory, as a cursory reading of Plato's *Charmides* makes clear.

virtue concepts.⁶ For this reason, I shall not attempt to clarify the notion beyond the following sketch, which will serve to orient the reader:

Arrogance, insolent self-assertion, was the quality most detested by the Greeks. [Σωφροσύνη] was the exact opposite. It meant accepting the bounds which excellence lays down for human nature, restraining impulses to unrestricted freedom, to all excess, obeying the inner laws of harmony and proportion. (Hamilton and Cairns 1961: 99)

It is important to notice that although the account I give of the logical behaviour of σωφροσύνη is, I believe, accurate, this is not required for my argument; it would be sufficient to make the points I want to make if σωφροσύνη *could* function in the way I shall suggest, and of this there is no doubt.

3.

The first dialogue below formally dramatises an inference parallel to what appears to be Metz's inference from the conjunction of global and African intuitions to the concept of *ubuntu*. But in this case the inference is from global and Spartan intuitions to the concept of σωφροσύνη.

DIALOGUE I

Visitor: Among the Spartans, is it thought beautiful (καλόν) to steal from another person, or to betray one's friends?

Spartan: Certainly not.

Visitor: Do you say that that it is beautiful for a young man to honour his mother and father?

Spartan: Very much so.

Visitor: So, then, do you say that it is σώφρονα for the young to honour their parents, and not σώφρονα for a man to steal from another, or to betray his friends?

Spartan: I do not.

⁶ This would not be possible, or possible to the same extent, if I had selected justice or courage, concepts that are *shared* by Ancient Greek and contemporary Western ethical traditions. The account of σωφροσύνη assumed in this paper is largely drawn from Plato's *Charmides*. This is perfectly compatible with a Spartan emphasis since the dialogue's primary interlocutors, Charmides and Critias, are associated with the pro-Spartan oligarchy of 404BC installed after the Peloponnesian War; the entire dialogue is, as Schmid (1981: 145) observes, steeped in the "honour and shame ethic of the Dorian tradition". See North (1948) on the development of σωφροσύνη in Greek literature.

For the friends of σωφροσύνη, respect for elders is σώφρων.⁷ However, theft and murder do not naturally fall under the concept of σωφροσύνη, but under the concept of justice.⁸ Therefore, the Spartan interlocutor does not accept the inference from the global and Spartan intuitions to the concept of σωφροσύνη. Therefore, any further inference from the global and Spartan intuitions to a “principled rendition” (329) of σωφροσύνη would be misguided.

As noted above, Metz's goal in his article is to rationally reconstruct values “associated with talk of ‘ubuntu’” (322); he claims to be seeking “a theory inspired by *ubuntu* that best accounts for both [global and local African] intuitions” (323). However, if *ubuntu* is like σωφροσύνη in being one particular virtue, and if the intuitions expressing global and distinctively African moral judgments do not fall under the same virtue concept, then Metz's inference from the global and local intuitions to *ubuntu* will be invalid. The objection is not that the inference is invalid because it is an inference to the best explanation, but rather that the conceptually necessary conditions required for an abduction that generates an account of *ubuntu* (rather than some other concept) are not fulfilled because there are (*ex hypothesi*) ethical intuitions included in the data set that do not fall under the concept of *ubuntu*.

Some of Metz's formulations suggest that he thinks of *ubuntu* as a term referring to a cluster of values rather than a single virtue.⁹ If this is so, then he might avoid the invalid inference, but only at the cost of distorting the logical character of the *ubuntu* concept. For the scholarly literature on African ethics provides compelling evidence for taking *ubuntu* to refer primarily to an attribute of character or of soul.¹⁰

4.

The next dialogue permits the inference from distinctively Spartan intuitions to the concept of σωφροσύνη. What is in question is the relationship between σωφροσύνη and the other virtues.

7 See Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.5.15, where Pericles asks: “When will the Athenians respect their elders in the same way that the Spartans respect theirs, instead of despising everyone older than themselves, beginning with their own fathers?” (Garland trans.; qtd. in [2008: 66]) See also Herodotus 2.80 and Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus*, 15.2 and 21.4. Cf. North's reference to Telemachus's modesty in dealing with his Spartan host, Menelaus (North 1948: 5).

8 See Plato, *Charmides*; cf. Rep. 443a. If this is not accepted, the point can be made conclusively in terms of ἀνδρεία.

9 See e.g. Metz's reference to “values associated with the largely black and Bantu-speaking peoples” (2007a: 321) and “values associated with the term ‘ubuntu’” (ibid. 323).

10 See e.g. Gade (2012) and Van Niekerk (2013: 86-89). Van Niekerk quotes Semantimba Barlow as claiming that “*ubuntu* is ascribed to a person in whom virtue conglomerates” (qtd. on 87). Cf. also Gyekye (2011). The sense of *ubuntu* as a philosophy outlined by Gade is plainly a derived and secondary use of the term.

DIALOGUE II

Visitor: Do you say that that it is beautiful for young people to honour their mothers and fathers?

Spartan: Very much so.

Visitor: And is it not the case that, for the Spartans, a man who does not marry does not act beautifully?

Spartan: That is true.

Visitor: And do you then say that the things mentioned are σώφρονα?

Spartan: I do.

Visitor: And if something is σώφρονα, then this is on account of σωφροσύνη?

Spartan: Yes.

Visitor: So, then, do you say that σωφροσύνη is the most beautiful of the things pertaining to soul (τὰ κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν)?

Spartan: No, I do not.

Although σωφροσύνη was “to the Greeks...an ideal second to none in its importance,” being “the spirit behind the two great Delphic sayings, ‘know thyself’ and ‘nothing in excess’” (Hamilton and Cairns 1961: 99), it is one of a plurality of fundamental ideals. Thus, it does not follow from the fact that certain characteristically Spartan intuitions fall under the concept of σωφροσύνη that σωφροσύνη is the most important virtue. With application to Metz’s argument, the point is that even if the African intuitions enumerated were to fall under the same particular virtue concept, it would not follow that *ubuntu* is the fundamental ethical ideal.¹¹ Hence the inference from *ubuntu* to more general claims about African ethics is problematic.

The specific point underlying the Spartan interlocutor’s rejection of the inference from σωφροσύνη to “the most beautiful of the things pertaining to soul” is the omission of ἀνδρεία – literally manliness, but normally translated as courage (cf. Plato, *Laws*, 628c ff.). This concern carries over to the discussion of *ubuntu* in an interesting way. The scholarly literature on African ethics is – as far as I can tell – striking in its exclusion of the values associated with courage.¹² This is surprising, not only because the need for courage seems to arise from fundamental features of

11 This point would apply even if it so happened that all global and local African intuitions outlined by Metz could be subsumed under the *ubuntu* concept.

12 I have not found courage discussed in any of the sources cited in this paper.

the human condition, but because some Bantu peoples, such as the amaZulu, seem to have been Spartan-like in their valorisation of war.¹³ Therefore, inasmuch as courage is paradigmatically the virtue of the warrior,¹⁴ it seems likely that it would have occupied an important place in their ethical vocabulary.¹⁵

Metz needs to clarify the relationship between *ubuntu* and other virtues in African ethical thought. Formulated as questions: what is the place of manly courage, or wisdom, or justice, in the African traditions? Are *ubuntu* and courage both fundamental ideals, with neither one taking priority over the other? And if so, are they in some sense opposed to one another, as σωφροσύνη and ἀνδρεία are (cf. Plato, *Statesman*, 306b-307b)?

4.

The third dialogue again permits the inference from the distinctively Spartan intuitions to the concept of σωφροσύνη. The question this time is the relationship between σωφροσύνη and virtue (ἀρετή).

DIALOGUE III

Visitor: Do you say that it is beautiful for a young person to honour his mother and father?

Spartan: Very much so.

Visitor: And is it not the case that, for the Spartans, a man who does not marry does not act beautifully?

Spartan: That is true.

Visitor: And do you say that the things said (τὰ λέχθεντα) are σώφρονα?

Spartan: I do.

13 See e.g. Laband (1995).

14 See Aristotle, EN 1115b12-13. The Athenian stranger in Plato's *Laws* attributes the following to the Spartan poet Tyrtaeus: "I'd not mention a man, I'd take no account of him, no matter...if he were the richest of men, no matter if he had a huge number of good things...unless his prowess in war were beyond compare" (629a-b; Saunders trans.).

15 I am grateful to an anonymous referee for *Phronimon* for pointing me to T. Waetjen's discussion of the "martial reputation of Zulu manhood" (2004: 2) that "developed in the wake of King Shaka kaSenzangakhona's exploits". The same referee adds: "Recall that during the Frontier Wars, even the enemy considered the Xhosa 'real men' because they fought bravely... [As] one nineteenth-century colonial Captain stated, if trapped a Xhosa warrior would 'stand up like a man and throw his last assegai' (J. Alexander [1837] 1: 338, cited in Jeffrey B. Peires, *The house of Phalo: A history of the Xhosa people in the days of their independence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 139)".

Visitor: And if something is σώφρονα, then this is on account of σωφροσύνη?

Spartan: Yes.

Visitor: So do you say that σωφροσύνη is ἀρετή?

Spartan: No, I do not.

Although σωφροσύνη was to the Spartans a very fundamental ideal, it does not follow that σωφροσύνη is virtue (ἀρετή). Σωφροσύνη is not virtue, but *a* virtue (cf. Plato, *Meno*, 73d f.). If, therefore, *ubuntu* were a particular virtue, the inference from *ubuntu* to virtue itself would fail, even if the global and local intuitions enumerated by Metz could all be subsumed under the concept. On the other hand, if *ubuntu* is like ἀρετή in referring to the genus of which (e.g.) wisdom, justice, courage and σωφροσύνη are parts or determinates, then a Metzian inference from global and local ethical intuitions to *ubuntu* will go through. But the formal validity of the inference will incur certain costs, in particular, those of conceptual imprecision and loss of ethical structure. A parallel inference from the act-types representative of global and local Spartan intuitions directly to the concept of ἀρετή flattens out the conceptual landscape. The specific domains of excellence which make up virtue as a whole are elided.

Is *ubuntu* one virtue among many or virtue itself? Some of the literature on African ethics seems to support the idea that *ubuntu* is equivalent to virtue itself.¹⁶ One line of argument in support of this claim discernible in the scholarship is an appeal to etymology.¹⁷ The word *ubuntu* is the abstractive form of *-ntu*, which is the root of the Nguni word for “man” or “human being”.¹⁸ Since the reference is to the human being as a whole, the inference is made that *ubuntu* corresponds to the concept of human virtue or excellence. Or, at any rate, this implication seems to have been embraced by those who have given perfectionist interpretations of the concept.¹⁹

In response to this line of reasoning, two tentative remarks: first, in the interviews conducted by Christian Gade (2012), *ubuntu* is explicated in terms of what seems to be a very specific set of virtues having to do with kindness, forgiveness, empathy

16 Of those writers cited by Metz, see e.g. Tutu (2000: 31), Ramose (1999: 52) and Shutte (2001: 30).

17 Cf. Mangosuthu Buthelezi's remark that “‘humanism’ is the nearest translation of what *ubuntu* is”, reported in Gade (2012: 492). See also Metz (2007a: 323) and Eze (2010: 160-61).

18 The root is taken to originate in a proper name; for Ntu is thought to be the forefather of the Bantu peoples. “According to oral historian Senzo “‘Maswidi’” Mkhanyiseni Mbatha as far as he knows the first black person that we hear of is ‘Ntu’, the ancestor of all African people. The plural noun ‘abantu’ is a result of Ntu’s name being used in plural form to categorise his descendants” (Hlatshwayo 2010).

19 See e.g. Ramose (1999) and the other authors cited by Metz on p.331. Cf. also Van Niekerk (2013: 98-100).

and compassion.²⁰ It is difficult to believe that this emphasis, even if referring to the fundamental human ideal, is compatible with an analysis of *ubuntu* as the generic term under which other virtue concepts are ordered. Secondly, it is worth noticing that the move from human being or man – the ambiguity is crucial – to virtue itself would be misleading in the Greek case, since the word ἀνδρεία is linguistically an abstractive substantive derived from “man” (ἄνθρωπος; from PIE *ner).²¹ Hence the nature of the human being is here interpreted in terms of *man*, a masculine human ideal.²² The absence of courage from the topography of African ethics seems to correspond, in a curious way, with a Christian and Kantian articulation of humanity.

5.

Given uncertainty about the conceptual role of *ubuntu*, it might seem better for Metz to build up his account from the two groups of African ethical intuitions directly to the concept of rightness, bypassing the notion of *ubuntu* altogether and talking more generally in terms of an African ethical theory.²³ However, this manoeuvre will both leave him vulnerable to the objection that the selected act-intuitions give a lopsided *ubuntu*-heavy picture of the African ethical worldview, and would invite some additional questions about the envisioned transformation of a virtue concept into the language of right action.

DIALOGUE IV

Visitor: Among the Spartans, is it thought beautiful to steal from another person, or to betray one's friends?

Spartan: Certainly not.

20 This is also the sense that one gets from the explanation of *ubuntu* given by President Nelson Mandela (2006).

21 Cf. also the fact that “virtue” derives from the Latin *virtus*: “...manliness; valour, bravery, courage (in war); excellence, worth, from *vir* “man”...” See Harper (2007).

22 The word ἄνθρωπος, a word for both a man and for the human being, is often analysed as combination of ἄνθρω and ὤψ, that is, “man-faced”. See Harper (2007).

23 It should be noted that Metz's account is developed in dialogue with several African philosophers, some of whom seem to have attempted a similar conversion of African ethical concepts into the rightness vocabulary of contemporary normative ethics (Metz 2007a: 329 ff.). The concerns expressed below will apply *a fortiori* to these endeavours. I will not argue that this type of project is always illegitimate, although I do believe it is always problematic. The root of my concern can be expressed by saying that conceptual conversion in the absence of a clear delineation of the contours of the source ethical language is bound to involve distortion. See also the discussion in §6.

Visitor: Do you say that it is beautiful for a young man to marry and beget children?

Spartan: Very much so.

Visitor: Well, then, do you say that it is *right* for a young man to marry and beget children, and *wrong* for one to steal from another person, and to betray his friends?

Spartan: No, I do not.

Visitor: So do you say that is *wrong* for a young man not to marry and have children, and *right* for one to steal from another person, and to betray his friends?

Spartan: I least of all.

The Spartan interlocutor will not accept the move to rightness; he does not have the concept.²⁴ The closest concepts to rightness in the Greek tradition are τὸ πρέπον and τὸ προσήκον, “the appropriate” and “the fitting” (cf. Plato, *Rep.* 332a ff.). But it is revealing that neither Plato nor Aristotle devotes any attention to these notions in their ethical writings. At the very least, therefore, it cannot be doubted that the virtues such as wisdom, justice, courage (ἀνδρεία) and σωφροσύνη are, for the Hellene, immeasurably more important than rightness and fittingness. Thus the inference to rightness would not strike the Spartan interlocutor as correct, or obviously correct, as it would strike us, and this reveals much about the structure of his ethical language.²⁵

A basic question for Metz is thus the place of the concept of rightness in the original ethical vocabulary of the Bantu-speaking people.²⁶ If the concept of rightness is not part of the original conceptual vocabulary, then the attempt to transpose the ethical intuitions of African people into the language of right will involve a fundamental deviation from the way that they think of themselves. To be sure, it is obvious that the notion of right action has a long history in Africa, in part because of the influence of Christianity and Islam. But it is not clear that this will help Metz's cause; for he appears to be attempting a reconstruction of indigenous African ethical ideals.

24 Although the concept of justice covers the first two intuitions (theft and betrayal), the value of marriage and bearing children is not fundamentally a matter of justice.

25 It seems to me that if rightness were understood as a general term of approbation, then the Spartan would accept the inference to rightness, although it would strike him as strange and distorting, perhaps in a way that is akin to the strangeness of describing torture and rape as “impolite”. On the other hand, if rightness were understood more strongly as indicating an *obligation*, then the Spartan would not accept the inference. For this, he would use the term justice.

26 See Gyekye (2011: section 2) for discussion of the way that various African languages express judgments of right and wrong in terms of judgments of character. Notably, Gyekye claims that the Bantu language of Southern Sotho has “no words that are the direct equivalents of ‘ethics’ or ‘morality’” (ibid.).

6.

As I understand him, Metz's goal in the paper is to transform the fundamental ethical opinions of Bantu-speaking sub-Saharan African people into the language of English and of right action (322). If the term "translation" is restricted to natural language and (artificially) set aside, and "transposition" is used for the conceptual conversion of virtue concepts into the language of right action, then this project can be said to be a matter of *systematic* ethical transposition. As he writes:

I go beyond moral anthropology in that I seek to *unify* variegated commonsensical beliefs and to argue that one such unification (which may not be widely held) is better than others. [322; emphasis added]

Metz's method of systematisation, apparently modelled on Rawls's reflective equilibrium (cf. Metz 2007c: 233), is roughly as follows:

1. Begin with two groups of "*ubuntu*" intuitions transposed into the language of *right* action: group 1 (= global); group 2 (= local).
2. Now consider principles P (1) – P (n) as candidates for unifying these intuitions.
3. P (x) is preferable to P (y), if (a) P (x) explains group 1 and group 2 intuitions whereas P (y) does not, or (b) P (x) explains them *better* than P (y).

By application of this method, Metz argues that "the most justified normative theory of right action that has an African pedigree is the requirement to produce harmony and to reduce discord, where harmony is a matter of identity and solidarity" (340).

Questions can be raised about both the "transposition" and the "systematic" components of the project. To begin with transposition, if *ubuntu* is, as seems to be the case, a virtue term,²⁷ then Metz aims to convert thick moral concepts into thin moral concepts.²⁸ This is a very difficult enterprise and risks losing much of the conceptual structure of the source vocabulary. In addition, if *ubuntu* is, as appears to be the case, a particular virtue that is not transparently related to justice, then things are even worse. The transposition of certain kinds of virtue concepts into the language of *right* is a hopeless enterprise. For example, one can display σωφροσύνη by respecting one's elders, doing things in a quiet and orderly manner, by blushing, and feeling shame (cf. Plato, *Charmides* 158c). But it is obviously impossible to express these actions and qualities in the language of right, which is, as its etymology indicates, fundamentally the vocabulary of law.²⁹ And something similar would be the case if *ubuntu* were at all akin to the virtue of σωφροσύνη, which has an adverbial force,

27 See note 10 above. I am here setting aside the question of whether *ubuntu* is a virtue, the fundamental virtue, or equivalent to virtue itself.

28 For this distinction, see Williams (1985: 130, 141-142).

29 As an adjective, "right" can be derived from the "Proto-Germanic *rekhtaz"; it is cognate with the German word *recht*. See Harper (2007).

applying to the manner in which an action is done, rather than, predominantly, a determinate array of act-types.

Moving on to the systematisation component, the following points apply. First, the question of what unifies the global and local ethical intuitions makes sense on the assumption that what unifies the moral act-types is not already known. But here it is important to notice, in regard to the Spartan dialogues, that the different intuitions about ethical action are already unified by different virtue concepts. The appearance of disunity is manufactured by abstracting the acts from the virtues and transposing them into the language of rightness. If there is a question of unity here, as of course there is, it will arise at the level of the virtues themselves.

Secondly, two senses of better unification are discernible in Metz's method of systematisation. The first has to do with faithfulness to the original ethical vocabulary; the second has to do with the goal of devising a plausible normative theory.³⁰ But these two senses of unification can come apart, as is indicated by his handling of "the dominant [perfectionist] interpretation of African ethics" (331).³¹

Although Metz has some reservations about the unifying power of the perfectionist account, he allows that the enumerated local and global intuitions can be unified by a duty to "maximise self-realisation" of one's communal nature (332). But he argues that the self-regarding orientation of the explanation is unsatisfying:

If I ask why I should help others, for example, this theory says that the basic justificatory reason to do so (though not my proper motive for doing so) is that it will help *me* by making me more of a *mensch* or a better person. However, a better fundamental explanation of why I ought to help others appeals not to the fact that it would be good for me...but to the fact that it would (likely) be good *for them*... (332)

Crucially, this objection enables him to move away from a perfectionist account of *ubuntu* in the direction of his relational theory.

I am not presently concerned to enter into the debate about whether perfectionism is objectionably self-regarding. My question is rather whether Metz's objection should be understood as a criticism of the original framework of *ubuntu*, or whether, as he believes, it specifies a constraint on the interpretation of the concept. The answer must be that if the unifying principle is part of the conceptual framework of the source language, then the objection counts as an objection to the framework, not an argument in favour of a different interpretation of it.

30 For example, Metz emphasises the first sense in his remark that Godfrey Onah's "conception of respect for human dignity is more African in flavour" than Judge Yvonne Mokgoro's Kantian interpretation (2007a: 329). However, it is striking that Metz does not fault Judge Mokgoro's Kantian interpretation for its potential infidelity to the African tradition, but for its lack of unifying power.

31 I here set aside certain qualms I have about Metz's formulation of the perfectionist interpretation of *ubuntu*.

Consider how this plays out in a Metzian theory of σωφροσύνη. Since the moral intuitions are within the tradition unified by the virtue concepts, the objection needs to be recast in terms of perfectionism's being a poor explanation for the *virtuousness* of the virtue concepts. But since there are (or: *if* there are) in the original ethical language conceptual connections between virtue, the good, and human self-realisation, conceptual transposition that does not recognise these connections will be distorted and inaccurate. Even if the goal is *systematic* transposition of the concept, the goal of fidelity to the source language cannot be set aside. For if it were, and the original concept were defined in part by its relationship to other concepts in the ethical vocabulary, *it* might not be reproduced at all.

Probably Metz would argue in response that his goal is to present a theory growing out of African ethical commitments, a claim that is indeed expressed at several junctures in his paper (e.g. 322 and 340). This would be to admit that the dialectical role of the critique of perfectionism is to move outside of the tradition and to become answerable to more general constraints of plausibility – and in particular, plausibility to a Western philosophical audience.

Three points can be made in response. First, this manoeuvre would apparently require Metz to give up on his claim that “there is strong epistemic reason to hold [the theory], in relation to certain moral intuitions common to sub-Saharan Africa and in comparison to other theoretical expressions of African morality” (322). Secondly, he would then risk presenting a theory in which neither Western people nor sub-Saharan Africans find themselves reflected,³² a theory that resonates with no one. Thirdly, Metz is not really in a position to know that the original conceptual framework – in which, perhaps, virtue was logically related to self-realisation – must be abandoned. For, as is clear from the description of his method given at the beginning of the section, Metz does not conduct what could be termed “ethical exegesis” – that is, the articulation, clarification, and deepening of the African tradition's understanding of its own ethical concepts. But since this implies that he tries to perform the systematic transposition without a clear understanding of the role of *ubuntu* in the source vocabulary, it is hard to see how he could *know* that the original framework needs to be abandoned. One can't know that the external criticism holds until one understands the possibilities open to the reconstruction in terms of the source language.

7.

In summary, I have argued that no reasonable transposition of the Metzian sort is possible without a clearer understanding of the logic of the concept of *ubuntu*. In particular, it needs to be determined whether *ubuntu* is a virtue conceptually

32 I here echo a phrase used by Metz in unpublished work.

connected to human self-realisation, whether it is one of a plurality of fundamental virtues or the fundamental virtue, or perhaps, a term for virtue itself.³³

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