

African Ethics through Ubuntu: A Postmodern Exposition

by

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Abstract

This paper looks at the philosophy of *hunhu/ubuntu* as a postmodern idea that seeks to break free from the Western intellectual hegemony that defines reality universally, objectively and in individual terms. The exercise begins by outlining and discussing the nature, character and origin of *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics before defining and characterizing the idea of postmodernism and establishing its link with *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics. The link is established with a view to utilize the idea of postmodernism to defend *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics against a background of its adulteration or corruption by modernists, who believe that *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics can only gain their status as genuine ethics, when they are compared with Western ethics in terms of their aims, scope and methodology, and by *Western ethics* is meant Aristotelian eudaimonism, Platonic justice, Kantian deontology and Hobbesian egoism among others. Arguing from a postmodern perspective, I conclude that *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics through their moral imperative – the Common Moral Position (CMP) – are also a competing narrative or language game that deserves a place among the world's competing philosophies.

Keywords: African ethics, African philosophy, *Hunhu/Ubuntu* ethics, postmodernism, The Common Moral Position and Western ethics.

Introduction

In this paper I do three things. First, I look at the nature, character and origin of *hunhu/ubuntu* as a key aspect of African ethics. By African ethics I mean the guiding injunctions as well as the norms and values peculiar to the communities of Africa south of the Sahara or Black Africa. Second, I define and characterize the concept of postmodernism focusing more on how it can be used to defend *hunhu/ubuntu* as a competing narrative or language game against its adulteration by modernists. Third, I explore the idea of the Common Moral Position (CMP) as the moral imperative of *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics.

The CMP is a moral imperative because once it is implanted in the minds of persons; they no longer need rules that are in black and white to remind them that what they have done is right or wrong. Here I am not talking about a moral imperative in the sense it is understood by people like Immanuel Kant, where the imperative is categorical, I am talking about a moral imperative in the sense of *tsika*¹ that are handed down by elders of one generation to another generation.

Having defined CMP, I argue that unlike Western-based approaches to ethics such as Aristotelian eudaimonism, Kantian deontology, Platonic Justice and Metzian basic norm, that are established by one person and focus more on individual actions, the CMP is communocratic and the processes leading to its establishment are not only dialogical, but are also spiritual. The processes are spiritual in the sense that one of the critical stakeholders in this three party dialogue is the spirit world that is responsible for enforcing the CMP. Arguing from a postmodern viewpoint, I put it that *hunhu/ubuntu* philosophy and its moral imperative – the CMP – are competing narratives operating at the same level as the Western ethical approaches. In the next section, I will focus on the nature, character and origin of *hunhu/ubuntu* philosophy as a distinct category of African philosophy/ethics.

The Nature, Character and Origin of Hunhu/Ubuntu as a Philosophy

The word *hunhu/ubuntu* as a linguistic expression denotes the philosophical/idealistic character of the communities of Southern Africa, where Southern Africa refers to countries like Zimbabwe, South Africa, Mozambique, Zambia, Malawi, Swaziland, Lesotho, Botswana, Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). *Hunhu/ubuntu* is the ideal of being human, derived from a worldview based on the guiding injunction: *Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (Nguni/Zulu/Ndebele) or *motho ke motho ka batho ba bangwe* (Sesotho) or *munhu munhu muvanhu* (Shona), which can be expressed in English “as a person is a person among other persons” (Broodryk 2008; Dolamo, 2013 and Tutu, 1999). It is also expressed in John Mbiti’s classic statement: “I am because we are, since we are therefore I am (Mbiti, 1969:215) or John S Pobee’s *cognatus ergo sum* which is translated as: “I am related by blood, therefore, I exist or “I exist because I belong to a family” (Pobee, 1979: 49). Let me briefly say something about the idea of sharing blood in Shona society. The concept of blood is key in defining and explaining *hunhu/ubuntu* philosophy.

Among the *Korekore-Nyombwe* people of Northern Zimbabwe and the generality of the Shona society, people who share the same *ropa* (which may be translated as blood) virtually share everything that is there to share including praise and blame (Mangena, 2015: 7). Nigerian Philosopher Innocent Chukwudolue Egwuutorah (2013: 411) makes reference to the Igbo people when he explains the connection between blood and community by remarking that, “there are factors which tie or bound the people in complementarity such as blood relation.” What stands out clearly in all these expressions is that *hunhu/ubuntu*, as a Southern African centred ethic, is *relational* and is the opposite of Western philosophy which is individualistic.

It is also important to note that, in terms of its character, *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics are also *dialogical*, which means that the process of attaining the ideals of *hunhu/ubuntu* require dialogue between *Musikavamhu/nyadenga/mwari/unkulunkulu* (Creator God), *midzimu* (ancestors) and *vanhu/abantu* (human beings) (cf. Mangena 2012b: 9).

Hunhu/ubuntu ethics are also *consensual* and *spiritual*. By *consensual* and *spiritual* I mean that there has to be agreement between the spirit world and the world of the living with regard to the establishment and operationalisation of *hunhu/ubuntu* in the world of the living. Unlike Western ethics that are only *horizontal*, that is, there have to do with relations between living beings; *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics are both horizontal and vertical, that is, the relations go beyond human relations to include the human beings' relations with the spirit world.

As shall be demonstrated later, *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics are operationalised through its imperative – the CMP – which is different from a mere moral quality (Gade 2012), a basic norm (Metz 2007) or a dignity principle (Taylor 2014) in that it is relational, dialogical, consensual, spiritual, horizontal and vertical. It is a way of life. Just as oil is the car's lifeblood, *hunhu/ubuntu*, through the CMP is also the lifeblood of the Bantu-speaking people² in Southern Africa. For instance, in almost every Southern African village; children are socialized to value the interests and needs of the group more than they would value their own individual interests. At a very early stage, boys are taught to head cattle as a group so as to foster the idea of group or community.

Thus, the idea of *hunhu/ubuntu*, through its attendant concept – the CMP– is imprinted in their minds at a very tender age and is embedded in their minds until they die. This is what makes *hunhu/ubuntu*, through the CMP, a way of life especially as they get to know that for as long as a person lives, problems are better solved as a group and that success is a group activity in which people put their hands and heads together. This spirit of community is also demonstrated in the Shona concept of *humwe/nhimbe* (working together). At a *humwe/nhimbe* members of a Shona community pull their resources together to help till, for free, the land of one of their colleagues who does not have resources. This promotes the idea of group or communal belonging which, in turn, promotes social cohesion between members, groups and/or communities. Having looked at the nature and character of *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics, it is important also to look at the debate around its social origins.

To begin with, the social origins of the notion of *ubuntu* (translated in Shona as *hunhu*), begins with scholars such as Johan Broodryk (2008: 45) who suggests that the notion of *ubuntu* may have originated from Egypt as far back as 1500BCE and was transferred to other parts of Africa during the cultural movements to the Southern parts of the continent. Although this theory is not very popular as it has not attracted the attention of most African scholars on *ubuntu*, especially philosophers hailing from the continent, it is a theory that is worth considering given that the Egyptian concept of *ma'at* has always been used to refer to the communal character of the Egyptians from time immemorial.

It is possible that the word *ma'at* may have been corrupted to read *muthu*, *umuntu*, *botho* and *munhu* which are Bantu³ terms referring to a human being. The term *ubuntu* or its equivalent *hunhu* would probably then have been derived from *muthu*, *munhu*, *umuntu* referring to the philosophy of these Bantu speaking people⁴ of Southern Africa. However, emerging linguistic evidence now seems to suggest that the term may have originated from the Bantu languages of Southern Africa that include: Shona, Isindebele, Zulu, Xhosa, Sesotho and Tswana among others (cf. Battle 2009). The justification is that across all the Bantu languages, the existence of the suffixes *-ntu* (for *ub-untu*) *-tho* (for *Bo-tho*) and, *-nhu* for *hu-nhu*) suggest that these suffixes have the same sound or linguistic roots. This seems to be a popular view defended by most African writers that include Moqobe Ramose, Stanlake Samkange and Tommie Marie Samkange, Thaddeus Metz, Desmond Tutu, Charles Vila-Vicencio and others. In this exercise, I do not intend to take this debate further than this point. Suffice to say that the issue of the origins of the term *hunhu/ubuntu* has a bearing on the efficacy and postmodern exposition of the same. At this juncture, I will now focus on what *hunhu/ubuntu* philosophy is not, as opposed to what it is. The idea is to show that there is a huge difference between *hunhu/ubuntu*, as a key aspect of African philosophy/ethics and the Western forms of philosophizing. To begin with, *hunhu/ubuntu* is not a principle or rule-based philosophy that is more interested in explaining individual behavior and the attendant discourse of individual rights. *Hunhu/ubuntu* is not a philosophy or theory crafted by one person, as is the case with Aristotelian eudaimonism, Kantian deontology or Platonic dualism (Mangena, 2012: 11), it is a communal way of life as lived by the Bantu-speaking people of Southern Africa.

Against this backdrop, *hunhu/ubuntu* cannot be reduced to a mere moral quality, a basic principle or a norm; it is more than all these. A person is born espousing *hunhu/ubuntu* and dies espousing *hunhu/ubuntu*. There is not a time in the life of a Bantu person when he or she ceases to live by the dictates of *hunhu/ubuntu*. This is shown even in the way in which the Bantu speaking people, particularly the Shona people, greet each other. When greeting one individual the Shona say: *Makadini?* (How are you?). The prefix *maka-* is always in the plural form to denote the value placed on the group as opposed to the value placed on the individual. The suffix *-dini* has to do with the state of health and wellness of the group or clan. The assumption is that a Shona person is always accompanied by his relations and/or ancestors where ever they are. So, the Shona people inquire about the state of health and wellness of the individual through the group, to show that that an individual cannot be in good health when members of his group or clan are sick and vice versa.

Edwin Etieyibo (2014: 73) calls this a humanistic approach to *ubuntu*, whereby the interests, needs and well-being of the group are seen to be more important than anything and there is emphasis on sharing, caring and compassion for others. Etieyibo sums this up when he remarks, “your pain is my pain, my wealth is your wealth and your salvation is my salvation” (2014: 73). Later, a postmodernist approach shall be utilized to argue that since *hunhu/ubuntu* philosophy is a culture inspired philosophy, it must to be respected as a competing narrative or language game. Below, I define and characterize the concept of postmodernism in order to buttress the foregoing.

Postmodernism: Definition and Characterization

According to Hassan Habib Ihab (1987), the term *postmodern* was first used around the 1870s. John Watkins Chapman suggested “a postmodern style of painting” as a way to depart from French Impressionism. The term was popularized by Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jean Francois Lyotard among others. *Postmodernism* arose as a reaction to modernism’s claim to universal truths and objectivity especially as it characterized Western thinking. While, postmodernism generally identifies the central narrative of modernity to be the promise of progress and the application and primacy of reason, three problems arise from this thinking (Rational Wiki, 2015).

First, postmodernists doubt that “progress” can be meaningfully defined. Second, they do not believe that everything can be meaningfully quantified and rationally optimized as is claimed by modernists. Third, they question ethnocentric conceptions of the world and they see science and technology as failing to equate to social progress (Rational Wiki, 2015). Postmodernists also question the view by modernists that humanity has an essence that distinguishes humans from nonhuman animals and that humans acquire knowledge about natural reality, which is ultimately justifiable on the basis of evidence, demonstration or principles, which are or can be recognized directly, intuitively, or with certainty (Etieyibo, 2014: 68).

It is important, however, to note that while this section brings out the link between *hunhu/ubuntu* philosophy and postmodernism, it is important also to observe that most of the Western philosophers who have been given the designation “postmodern philosophers” have, themselves, refused to be referred to as such. Foucault, for instance, rejected the term as a self-descriptor (Rational Wiki, 2015). Philosophers who have mounted a full scale attack on Logical Positivism are sometimes also called postmodernists although they have also refused to accept this label (Rational Wiki, 2015). This, however, is a subject that would require a different research project. At this juncture, I will now define and characterize postmodernism as a movement.

As Aylesworth (2013) puts it, “postmodernism is at some level indefinable.” This, as Etieyibo (2014: 67) would argue, should not be interpreted to mean that the term is beyond comprehension. Brian Duignan (2014), for instance, defines *postmodernism* as a philosophical movement which is largely a reaction against the philosophical assumptions and values of the modern period of Western (specifically European) history, that is, the period from about the time of the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries to the mid-20th century. Indeed, many of the doctrines characteristically associated with postmodernism can fairly be described as the straightforward denial of general philosophical viewpoints that were taken for granted during the 18th-century enlightenment.

Central to postmodern thinking is the emphasis on the importance of power relationships, personalization and discourse in the way truth is construed (2014: 68). Thus, postmodernism deconstruct meta-narratives preferring multi-narratives whereby truth is seen as subjective and not objective as it is defined by modernists.

To the post-modernist, every person writes from his or her own point of view and there are no universal or objective truths. Postmodernism accuses modernity of serving to undermine and marginalize other worldviews (2014: 68). Postmodernism is therefore pernicious, harmful, misleading and false (2014:68).

While postmodernism has had many followers ever since it came to challenge modernism, it also has its fair share of limitations. Richard Dawkins (2007) criticizes postmodernism for what he calls “lack of content.” In other words, for Dawkins, postmodernism does not have a content of its own and so it is much ado about nothing. Charles Colson has also criticized postmodernism for being ideologically agnostic and replete with moral relativism or situation ethics (quoted in Seidner, 2009: 3). Thus, the same kinds of criticisms that have been labeled against relativism are the same kinds of criticisms that can also be leveled against postmodernism, one of which is that both moral relativism and postmodernism do not leave room for moral criticism and moral reform, that is, if, according to relativism, right action is a function of the individual’s opinions, feelings and tastes then it means no one can be mistaken when it comes to moral matters and individuals will never learn from others, morally speaking. If, as postmodernism would suggest, that “everyone writes from his own point of view,” then every view must count. The problem with both views is that the world will never agree on anything. Notwithstanding these criticisms, postmodernism can still be utilized to defend the efficacy of *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics against its adulteration or by the corruption of modernists.

Hunhu/Ubuntu Ethics and Postmodernism: A Critical Appraisal

In this section, I explain the link between *hunhu/ubuntu* philosophy and the idea of postmodernism, and secondly, I demonstrate how postmodernism has defended *hunhu/ubuntu* as a complete ethic that can also stand as a competing narrative or a language game. With regard to the issue of the link between *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics and postmodernism, Etieyibo (2014: 72) remarks thus, “if postmodern thinking is right then it would suggest that African philosophy is a competing narrative or language game and that it may be open to some of the worries facing modern thinking.” By this claim, Etieyibo seems to be suggesting that *hunhu/ubuntu* philosophy can better be understood from a postmodernist view point.

The point that Etieyibo is probably making here is that if the arguments presented by postmodernists against modernism are valid and sound; for instance, if it is logically valid and sound to argue that there is no universal or objective truths and that there are multi-narratives and not meta-narratives, then it follows that *hunhu/ubuntu* philosophy is a competing narrative that can stand without being aided by Western approaches to ethics. Thus, the claim by Augustine Shutte (1993) that *ubuntu* must be augmented by the Western concept of freedom in order to be complete becomes false.

Thus, the attempt to validate *ubuntu* ethics through comparing them with Kantian deontology as is done by Metz (2007) and Taylor (2014) also becomes false. Let me quickly take you through how the two have sought to come up with some action guiding principles that can ‘help’ *ubuntu* to regulate human behavior. In his popular article entitled *Toward an African Moral Theory* published in 2007, Metz argues that:

The literature on African ethics contains relatively little that consists of normative theorization with regard to right action, that is, the articulation and justification of a comprehensive, basic norm that is intended to account for what all permissible acts have in common as distinct from impermissible ones (Metz, 2007: 321).

Metz maintains that “the field [of African ethics] lacks a well-defended general principle grounding particular duties that is informed by such values and that could be compared to dominant Western theories such as Hobbesian egoism or Kantian respect for persons” (2007: 321). He therefore calls for the need to search for a basic norm that constitutes African ethics and serves as the foundation around which morality revolves.

This prescriptive approach to doing ethics also becomes apparent when Metz argues that, “in seeking to construct an African theory of right action, my aim is to develop a principle that sub-Saharan Africans ought to believe” (2007:322). No doubt, Metz seems to think that he has a better appreciation of African ethics than the African people themselves, as he remarks thus:

I seek to develop a moral theory that is non-religious at its base; I do so partly since I favour ethical naturalism on meta-ethical grounds, and partly since it is a sufficiently large and coherent project... (2007: 328).

Metz is persuaded to think that Western ethics have great influence on African ethics and that is why he “seeks to develop a moral theory that is non-religious” (Metz, 2007: 328). I argue that it is not possible for African ethics to have a base that is non-religious given that, in Africa south of the Sahara, it is difficult to separate what is ethical from what is religious. Elsewhere, John S Mbiti argues that African people are notoriously religious which probably means that everything African must also have religion as its base. This point also finds corroboration from George J Sefa Dei (1994: 12) who argues that religion should be one of the major themes of Afrocentric pedagogy. What this suggests for Dei is that the idea of African ethics is centred on “religion, with particular reference to the African conception of the triadic constitution of community as including the living, the living-dead and the yet to be born” (1994: 12).

This point is also explicated by both Mkhize and Ramose who argue that *ubuntu*, which is the key defining feature of African ethics, “is characterized by connectedness and an on-going fellowship with ancestors” (quoted by Taylor, 2014: 331). For Ramose, “the *ubuntu* community comprises the living, the dead (ancestors) and the yet to be born” (quoted in Taylor 2014: 331). Elsewhere, I also argue that *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics are onto-triadic implying that the *hunhu/ubuntu* community comprises *musikavanhu* (Creator God), *midzimu* (ancestors-the living timeless) and *vanhu* (those living their dated lives) (Mangena, 2012b: 14). All these premises lead to the conclusion that religion forms the basis of African ethics.

Thus, the attempt, by Metz, to take away the idea of religion from African ethics is meant to show that African ethics, in themselves, without this Metzian adulteration, cannot be a competing narrative. It would seem, to me, that in the mind of Metz, Africa has no moral standards against which human behavior can be judged as right and wrong and these have to come from elsewhere. It seems too that, in the mind of Metz, any moral approaches that are not comparable to or that do not closely approximate the rule-based or principle-based Hobbesian or Kantian theories of morality cannot be taken seriously as approaches to doing moral philosophy.

No doubt, the implications are that there is a claim to universal truths and objectivity by the impression being given by Metz here is that the concept of moral value is universal and is based on reason, a view which is utterly dismissed by postmodernists as “pernicious, harmful, misleading and false” (Etieyibo, 2014: 68). The postmodernist would probably argue that African ethics do not need to be grounded on a basic principle or norm in order to be a competing narrative or language game. They would probably argue that Africans, themselves are better placed to define African ethics as it pertains to them. Taylor, like Metz, also believes that African ethics require some principles [which are comparable to principles in the West] that can stand as action guides in the promotion of *ubuntu*-like behaviour. For Taylor (2014:331):

One can adopt a deontological approach to find some rule-based theory of right action by which to define *ubuntu*-like behavior. He also maintains that one can adopt a consequentialist approach and determine, somehow, what *ubuntu*-like behaviours minimize harm or maximize good for the community and the individual; or can adopt a virtue ethics approach and try to define what kinds of persons we should be and what types of character traits we should exhibit if we are to be *ubuntu*-like people.

What Taylor is probably saying here is that *ubuntu* has to be anchored on any one of the approaches mentioned above, without which it will not be able to determine which *ubuntu*-like behaviours minimize harm or which ones maximize good for both the individual and the community. What it basically means for Taylor, as for Metz, is that, without their input, *ubuntu* is not itself a competing narrative compared to deontological approaches, consequentialist approaches and virtue based approaches. In fact Taylor confirms this indirectly when he says:

The need to develop a principle of right action arises because I believe that we require a foundation, a set of rules, from which to determine ethical business behavior. The problem that we face is that numerous authors write about *ubuntu*, but do not treat it as a principle of right action.

There is no prize guessing where the bias on rules and principles is coming from as it appears that both Metz and Taylor are influenced, to a greater extent, by their appreciation of Western-based deontological, consequentialist and virtue based approaches to ethics. There is nothing wrong in appreciating these approaches; the only problem comes when one thinks that approaches in non-Western cultures cannot stand without the blessing of Western thinkers. From a postmodernist approach, this kind of thinking is wrong because it has a universalizing tendency.

So, if postmodernism, as an approach, is something to go by then Taylor's approach is problematic, as only the Bantu people can define and characterize *hunhu/ubuntu* as a philosophy. Remember the postmodern claim that: "every person writes from his or her own point of view and there are no universal or objective truths." In any case:

Truth does not exist in any objective sense but is created rather than discovered...truth is created by the specific culture and exists only in that culture. Therefore, any system or statement that tries to communicate truth is a power play, an effort to dominate other cultures (McDowell and Hostetler, 1998: 208)

What McDowell and Hostetler are saying here is that truth is relative to culture and although the two do not make a direct reference to values, it would seem that they are also relative to culture. If this is correct, then it follows that modernism's claim to universal truth, values and knowledge is probably false and this would automatically qualify *hunhu/ubuntu* philosophy as a competing narrative or language game. Having grappled with nature, character, origin and adulteration of *hunhu/ubuntu* philosophy as well as toying around with the idea of postmodernism, it is reasonable to outline and explain the moral imperative on which *hunhu/ubuntu* philosophy is based.

Postmodernism, Hunhu/Ubuntu and the Common Moral Position

Probably, before outlining and explaining the moral imperative upon which *hunhu/ubuntu* philosophy is based, it may be important to begin by briefly establishing the link between postmodernism and *hunhu/ubuntu* philosophy. In an attempt to establish this link (or lack thereof), it is important to note that postmodernism is there to promote the existence and force of multi-narratives as opposed to meta-narratives which are the driving force of modernism. Postmodernism, as noted earlier, does not take kindly to the universalizing tendency of modernism where certain places or cultures are seen as models with regard to the definition and conceptualization of truth, morality, science and even technology.

Postmodernists believe that no place or culture is better than the other. Against this background, we can, therefore, argue that – if postmodernism is anything to go by – then *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics cannot be validated through comparing them with Western ethics or Western philosophy. Thus, *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics remain a competing narrative or a language game despite the fact that it is not based on some action-guide principles or norms as found in other places or cultures. To avoid overgeneralizations, I will now outline and explain the moral imperative of *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics, especially in the context of Shona culture. Shona culture is the culture of the majority of the people of Zimbabwe who speak the Shona language which has six linguistic divisions, namely *Karanga, Korekore, Zezuru, Manyika, Ndau* and *Kalanga* (cf. Mangena, 2012a: 63).

To begin with, the moral imperative of *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics recognizes and values the importance of dialogue in the conceptualization and organization of Shona society, and that the community is at the centre of all moral deliberations which, of course, are premised on the idea of communal or group rationality also known as the Common Moral Position (CMP) (Mangena, 2012b: 10). It is *common* because it is a position that has been passed by elders, from generation to generation as *tsika* (the knowing or possessing and being able to use rules, customs and traditions of society), and is packaged in the rules, customs and traditions of the Shona society. It is also *common* because it is a characteristic feature of all Bantu-speaking people and it does not need to be established and authenticated by one person, as is the case with Aristotelian eudaimonism, Kantian deontology, Platonic Justice and Metzian basic norm. It is common because it has a group or communal authorship. This CMP is not some kind of principle or norm that is comparable to deontological, teleological or even virtue based principles as they obtain in the West. It is more than a mere principle, norm or even moral quality; it is a way of life.

As a *hunhu/ubuntu* moral imperative, the CMP holds that issues of right and wrong are issues of the group or community and not the individual. The group or community here is represented by elders who have the power to link the young generation to the spirit world and the spirit world to the young generation.

For instance, in the ritual process of *kudira fodya pasi* (pouring libation) as a form of ancestor veneration, it is the elders who intercede for their children: The elders often say: *Imi varikumhepo tokumbiravo kuti mutisvitsire mashoko aya kuna musikavanhu, kuti pwere dzenyu dzirikurasika nekuti ipwere dziregererei* (To you in the spirit world, we ask you to kindly pass this message to the creator God that your children are deviating from the norms because they are children, please forgive them).

This statement is usually made when the spirit world has imposed some sanctions on the individual who has deviated from some societal norms and values, for instance; sleeping with other people's wives, failing to look after one's parents, being disobedient to one's parents and killing people, among other forms of deviance. The CMP, as a moral imperative of *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics, simply says that since the individual is important in so far as he or she contributes to the betterment of the group or community, and since the group or the community is at the centre of all moral deliberations (Mangena, 2012b: 10), individual actions cannot be judged in isolation from the group or community. The group or community is responsible for the behavior of its members. In Shona society, for instance, if a young man or woman is caught behaving in an unusual manner; elders will ask the question: *Mwana wokwani uyu* (Whose child is he or she?) This suggests that the problem is not with the child but with the group or community where the child belongs.

Why are elders so important in the establishment and operationalisation of the CMP? First, it is important to observe that the CMP is a function of the Shona society's cultural conscience which, as I have noted earlier, is idealized through *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics (Mangena, 2012b: 12). Secondly, it is important to observe, as Dei (1994: 12) does, that the status and role of elders is important in the conceptualization and organization of African communities, including the Shona community. The elders are the custodians of the cultural conscience of every African society because of their wealth of experience. As such, the elders use their experience to formulate and transmit moral wisdom to the youth through folklores, proverbs and other knowledge tools (cf. Mangena, 2012b: 14). And as noted earlier, the moral wisdom which translates to the CMP is both dialogical and spiritual. It is dialogical in that it involves three critical stakeholders, namely: *musikavanhu/nyadenga/mwari* (Creator God), *midzimu* (ancestors), *vanhu vakuru* (elders of the community) and *vana vadiki* (the youth).

Elders of the community use their experience to formulate the CMP through story-telling, proverbs, riddles and idioms. The package is such that most of the stories, proverbs and idioms, which elders tell to the young generation have some moral lessons and these moral lessons emphasize more on the integrity of the group or community more than the integrity of the individual. For instance, the proverb: *Mazano marairanwa* (wisdom is a shared experience) teaches the youth that individual wisdom translates to nothing if it is not guided by the wisdom of the group or community (cf. Mangena 2012b: 15). The proverb: *Rume rumwe harikombi churu* (One man cannot surround an anthill) attests to the fact that an individual needs others to survive in an African set up.

We are what we are because of others. So, the CMP is brought to bear when individuals within a group or community realize that their individuality only carries meaning when they exist to serve the interests and needs of their group or community. Because the elders of the community understand the language of the spirit world as well as the language of this world, they are better positioned to establish and operationalise the CMP, as a moral imperative of *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics.

The question of how the CMP is enforced is very critical. While the elders of the community are responsible for establishing this imperative, *musikavanhu/nyadenga/mwari* through *midzimu* imposes sanctions on those who deviate from or violate this imperative. The sanctions can include: *minyama* (misfortunes), *urwere* (sickness), *kusazvara* (barrenness), *kuremara* (disability) and *rufu* (death). Hence, there is a dialogical process involved in the establishment and operationalisation of the CMP and this dialogical process involves the world of the living and the spirit world.

Conclusion

This paper looked at the nature, character and origin of *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics as the organizing philosophy of the Bantu-speaking people of Southern Africa. The exercise utilized the postmodern approach to argue that contextual philosophizing was philosophizing and that *hunhu/ubuntu* was a competing narrative or language game in the same way as virtue ethics, deontology, utilitarianism and egoism. The postmodern approach was used to challenge the adulteration or corruption of *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics by Western thinkers masquerading as African philosophers and to show that *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics was a complete philosophy without this adulteration. The paper observed that *hunhu/ubuntu* through its moral imperative; the CMP, is a product of the collective wisdom of the elders and not the wisdom of one individual within a given society and that in terms of character, *hunhu/ubuntu* ethics were relational, dialogical, consensual, spiritual, horizontal and vertical as opposed to Western ethics which were individualistic, elitist and horizontal.

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End Notes

¹ *Tsika* refers to the knowing or possessing and being able to use rules, customs and traditions of society (Pearce, 1990: 145).

² The Bantu speaking people are those indigenous African people who hail from Southern Africa and via the common characteristic of their languages in that they use words such as *munhu*, *muntu* or *muthu* for "human being" or in simplistic terms "person", and the plural prefix for human nouns starting with *mu-*(class 1), and in most languages as *ba-*(class 2) (Review Comment, Zulu 2016).

³ There are many Bantu terms that refer to human beings in Southern Africa but all of them point to the idea of group or community.

⁴ The philosophy of these Bantu speaking people is communitarian which means that they define their existence in terms of their communal space, and not their individual space.