Ubuntu and Deontology with Reference to Severely Mentally Disabled Persons

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Abstract

This article attempts, first of all, to normatively discuss the two moral theories namely; Ubuntu and Deontology with the aim of promoting the welfare of severely mentally disabled people. These theories seem to segregate severely mentally disabled human beings because Ubuntu argues that personhood is acquired through one's participation in communal traditional rituals while Deontology argues that personhood is acquired through autonomy and rationality. Secondly, this article addresses the question of the virtue of why severely mentally retarded people deserve to be respected instead of being used in medical research as research objects. The paper concludes with a recommendation that there is an urgent need to uphold moral duties of human beings towards other vulnerable human beings and value human life.

Key Words: Ubuntu, Deontology, autonomy, severely mentally disabled, solidarity, identity, vulnerable.

1.   Introduction

The maxim of ubuntu goes like; *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu/motho ke motho ka batho*. These are, respectively, Zulu and Sotho versions of a traditional African aphorism, often translated as: "a person is a person through other persons" (Ramose, 1999: 49; Shutte, 1993: 46). *Ubuntu* as a moral theory can be pertinent to protect the welfare of the severely mentally retarded people. The question I seek to answer is: in virtue of what do severely mentally retarded people deserve to be respected unlike being used in medical research as research objects? What is it that makes them special for respect at every stage of their lives? This question implies that the concept of respect applies to all human beings in all their different mental states.

On the other hand, the moral problem raised by *ubuntu* is its emphasis that personhood is the sort of thing, which has to be attained, and it is attained in direct proportion to the degree to which one participates in communal life. Deontology also falls in the same pool because it argues for the acquisition of autonomy and rationality. These conceptions could then equally be understood as excluding the severely mentally disabled people, who are unable to actively participate in community. In this article, I critically examine both the sub-Saharan African moral theory of (*ubuntu*) and deontology in the case of severely mentally retarded people. "Severely mental disabled means a disorder characterized by sub- average general intellectual function with deficits or impairments in the ability to learn, taking care of him/herself, and social skills" (Cantor, 2005: 3).

I have discussed some slippery slopes of these moral theories. For example, their inclusion of communal traditional participation in order for individuals to attain the status of personhood, and possession of autonomy and rationality segregate those who are severely mentally disabled because their mental incapacitation renders them unable to take part in communal activities. My recommendation is that in order for *ubuntu* to be more preferable than Deontology, its focus should be on the value of a human life prior to communal participation with the aim of protecting the welfare of the severely mentally disabled people.

2.   *Ubuntu* and Deontology as a moral theories

Under the light of this moral theory, a human being has a chance to fail to attain *botho* which can be translated to mean humanness. For example, those who perform immoral actions such as killing, raping,

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stealing, disrespecting others etc., are described as lacking the status of *botho*. The moral theory of *ubuntu* emphasizes that the only way to develop one's humanness is to relate to others in a positive way. "One becomes a person solely through other persons', which means that one cannot realize one's true self in opposition to others or even in isolation with them" (Metz & Gaie, 2010: 275). Under the guidance of *ubuntu* sub-Saharans do not consider themselves as hermits, but they consider themselves as beings that are communally integrated with one another regardless of their different status and positions in life.

The exhibition of *ubuntu/botho* humanness that can help one to develop well can be done in a communitarian background whereby an individual recognizes his character together with other's characters. Shutte (1993: 30) argues that "our deepest moral obligation is to become more fully human. And this means entering more and more deeply into community with others." Caring and respecting other human beings reflect the elements of *ubuntu* in a way that immoral actions that may thwart other people's welfare are prohibited. For example, people who disrespect severely mentally retarded people diminish their personhood in their communities because their actions lack the aspect of *ubuntu/botho*.

Just like in Kantian moral theory of deontology whereby an action is morally acceptable if it is in conformity with the categorical rules, *ubuntu* does the same job through its maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. Metz (2010: 51) explicitly argues that;

> *An action is right just insofar as it is a way of living harmoniously or prizing communal relationships, ones in which people identify with each other and exhibit solidarity with one another, otherwise an action is wrong.*

The solidarity and identification that Metz has highlighted maybe seen as the force of attraction that keeps the harmonious relationships alive among sub-Saharans. This harmonious relationship becomes vivid when people respect and care for the severely mentally retarded people. In that way, those who take care of such people solidify themselves as a whole. This maxim encourages only the positive relationships that show the respect to others regardless of their mental status. People like sorceries or witches do not qualify for the status of *ubuntu* because of their unacceptable actions that cause pain, sorrow and deaths of other people. Hence, "those that do not relate positively with others are said to lack *botho* and they are often described as animals" (Letseka, 2000: 186).

Harmony is achieved through close and sympathetic social relations within the group. This however implies that the common good of caring and loving one another can be attained through communal relationships. On this issue, Mbiti (1969:108) also says "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am." This statement refers to the promotion of the harmonious belongingness among the societal members without neglecting other human beings.

On the other hand, deontology is a duty based moral theory because it argues that people should always do their duties, and among their duties they ought to respect the moral laws such as lying is always bad. This moral theory argues for autonomy and rationality as the inherent attributes that give human beings the status of personhood. In Kant's ethics, "autonomy was considered as the ability to know what morality requires of us, and functions not as freedom to pursue ends, but as the power of the agent to act on objective and universally valid rules of conduct" (O'Neill, 2002: 84).

Kant argues for the human worth of human beings and he analysed that worth as inherently embedded within human beings because "of an endowment with reason, a reasoning power that enables them to exercise their autonomy and to follow the moral imperative" (Kant, 1996: 186). In addition to his argument, Beauchamp & Childress see personal autonomy as a "self-rule that is free from both controlling interference by others and from limitations, such as inadequate understanding, that prevent meaningful choices" (2001: 58). Autonomy in this regard can be seen on individuals who do their moral duties according to the demands of moral rules and principles. For Kant, it is morally wrong however for other human beings to make false promises to others, because such actions use other human beings as the means to an end, as well as violating their human worth.

2.1   The role of *Ubuntu* and Deontology towards severely mentally disabled

These theories play a profound role towards the severely mentally disabled people because they both put an emphasis on the moral obligations of other people towards others. For example, the maxim of *Ubuntu* which says "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu/motho ke motho ka batho*, often translated as: "a person is a person through other persons" depicts a morally standard manner of living harmoniously with other human beings in our different societies. This maxim illustrates our moral obligation to help and assist those who are in need. Since severely mentally retarded people are vulnerable due to their mental incapacitation, they therefore need our hands for the support in order to promote their welfare. In return, their existence and value of life in our societies also contribute to form harmonious relationship. In addition, *ubuntu* maxim also restricts our immoral conduct towards severely mentally disabled. For instance, it would be immoral to use this group of people in medical research as medical objects because we will not be treating them like human beings who are "persons through other persons".

For deontology, moral obligations do not depend on our particular desires, but they are categorical. That is, moral obligations are always binding; they mandate us to respect the moral laws. For example, we ought not to kill other human beings as well as making false promises. Categorical imperative has two rules namely; "Always act in such a way that you can also will that the maxim of your action should become a universal law. The other rule says; act so that you treat humanity, both in your own person and in that of another, always as an end and never as a means" (Kant,1996: 421). These rules are applicable to severely mentally disabled people because the first rule illustrates the dire need for moral principles to be universalizable. A typical example would be that it is morally bad to ill-treat severely mentally disabled people. This action can be willed to become the universal law because it reflects respect to other human beings without any discrimination. While the second rule of categorical imperative displays the distinction to be made between mere things and human beings by emphasizing the need to respect all human beings. For example, it would be immoral to use vulnerable human beings such as severely mentally disabled in harmful medical research mainly because they cannot consent and exercise their autonomy to be the research participants. This type of action would not be showing any respect to other human beings as the second rule of categorical demands.

2.2   The case of severely mentally disabled people

The case of severely mentally disabled people raises many controversial issues because some other moral philosophers argue that "severely mentally disabled people lack human worth" (for representative statements, see Plomer, 2005: 70; Kant, 1996: xxv; Metz, 2011: 545; Kant quoted in Metz, 2012: 397). "Severe mental retardation means a disorder characterized by sub- average general intellectual function with deficits or impairments in the ability to learn, taking care of him/herself, and social skills" (Cantor, 2005: 3). Their IQ scores often resulted between 20-40. The arguments of the above scholars are exclusively based on rationality and autonomy. They perceive these attributes as pivotal to an extent that without them an individual will lack human worth.

Mental behavioural problems often arise among those with the lower IQs such as the severely and the profoundly mentally retarded people. Severe mental retardation may be caused by many factors such as; "lack of oxygen during tetanus neonatorum; precipitate labour with rapid head moulding and haemorrhage; meningitis or encephalitis in childhood; and severe accidental injury to brain" (Byrne & Bennett, 1986: 228). Due to the mental abnormality that is caused by the above factors, it is clear then that severely mentally disabled people need our care, love, and support; because their mental incapacitation renders them to be unable to recognize their interests and needs.

This group of people cannot develop their characters in a morally acceptable manner because they lack proper self-reflection upon their actions. They cannot even understand the moral laws as well as its implications. It is even worse for them to participate in the communal practices or to take part in traditional rituals. Thus, the negative attitudes of the public towards people with mental retardation may violate the notion of respect for humanity which ought to be accorded to all human beings.

3.   Critique on *ubuntu* in the case of severely mentally disabled

The quandary issue about *ubuntu*'s and deontology's formulation of personhood emanates from their emphasis of the attributes that individuals ought to acquire. These attributes segregate other group of human beings. For instance, in medical arena there are some people who may be brain damaged, while some may be severely cognitively impaired during their lives. If personhood emanates from communal harmonious relationships, autonomy, and rationality, must we conclude that those human beings who are not able to take any part in the community, as well as relating to others in a positive way (infants), or who have lost them (those with dementia), or who never had them (those with congenital mental impairment) are beneath the status of personhood? I think the answer will be NO, because we are all human beings and we need to be accorded equal respect from our communities.

Ubuntu's emphasis on acquisition of personhood through communal harmonious relationships does not seem to include all human beings because it also says people are not born with that status, but an individual ought to acquire that status. Personhood in sub-Saharan African reflects "upholding mutual respect and compassion on others" (Ramose, 1999: 77). Due to the mental incapacitation, severely mentally disabled people will be rendered to uphold mutual respect and showing compassion on others in a society. Severely mentally disabled people cannot also make profound medical decisions on their own because such steps require proper critical thinking. In addition, these people are not self-reliant hence; they need the commitment of assistance from others. According to Menkiti (1984: 172), "an individual ought to learn, practice, and respect the communal traditional rituals in order for the community to accord the status of personhood to him or her." The above arguments show that the notion of personhood illustrated by *ubuntu* does not cover this group of people because they lack completely the stipulated attributes that succeed an individual to be accorded personhood.

On the other part of deontology, it is difficult for severely mentally disabled people to exercise their autonomy and rationality in such a way that they can be able to understand the rules of categorical imperative. Thus, since according to deontology these two attributes give human beings the status of personhood, it is obvious that the severely mentally disabled people will be perceived below the line of personhood because their dementia renders them to be incapable to possess these attributes (autonomy and rationality).

The quandary issue about the above arguments is that in medical arena there are some people who may be brain damaged (persistent vegetative state), while some may be severely cognitively impaired during their lives. If respect for persons depends on the rational will, must we conclude that those human beings who do not yet have the powers of rational autonomy (infants), or who have lost them (those with dementia), or who never had them (those with congenital mental impairment) are beneath human dignity? *Ubuntu* in this case takes over because it doesn't stipulate intramental qualities (rationality and autonomy) as the vital elements for respect for human persons, but it generally considers the notion of person through other persons. Individuals are considered in the web of the community where other human beings have an obligation to promote each one's welfare.

According to Murithi (2007: 282), it is through the maxim 'a person is a person through other people' that requires a belief of self-worth that creates an awareness of the worthiness of others and is realized in conduct that cherishes the dignity of others. Therefore, *ubuntu* as a moral theory can be more preferable than Deontology if its focus can be on the value of a human life prior to communal participation with the aim of protecting the welfare of the severely mentally disabled people equally without any hierarchical ranks. "The emphasis of *ubuntu* on the harmonious relationships makes it clear that respect for persons in the sub- Saharan context is acquired through living a life of mutual concern for the welfare of others, such as in a co-operative creation and distribution of wealth as a way of ensuring that as many people as possible can meet the basic needs of a good life" (Murithi, 2007: 277).

The concept of human worth is the idea that when we ascribe human worth to an individual, we do not take a slice of the individual's life at a given point in time and ask whether it instantiates a determinate

set of mental attributes, but we think about what the life meant to the individual himself or herself, family, friends and colleagues over time. All these aspects of a human life confer a meaning and value on an individual human life. However, human worth cannot be based on a set of qualities such as the ability to reason or think, feelings or have this or that emotion, since an individual human being may at any time lack any or all of these qualities during his or her lifetime and yet continue to retain his or her human worth without anyone justified to discriminate them.

Conclusion

The notion of *ubuntu* is encapsulated in most philosophies of life because is an important moral theory for harmonious relationships with other human beings. I think *ubuntu* has a potentiality than deontology to sustain the well-being of all human beings equally without any hierarchical ranks. Through the proper understanding of *ubuntu* as a moral theory, we should all feel the moral obligation to support and respect severely mentally disabled people because they are also persons.

However, if all human beings have the inner worth and they are perceived as persons through other persons, then we should not think of any ways that will disrespect and use the severely mentally disabled people as the means in our daily scientific medical research. By so doing, we will be violating their human worth. This however means that we do not just act or perform actions mainly because their end results are good to us, but we perform actions that are derived from moral and justifiable means that can also be willed to become the universal law. The value of a human life should take precedence over the value of communal participation that is viewed to give human beings the status of personhood.

Through the moral lens of *ubuntu*, any action that cannot promote the harmonious relationship among human beings lack the aspect of personhood and that action will be morally bad and unacceptable. Therefore, any action that disrespects those who are severely mentally disabled does not conform to this moral theory. Even though *ubuntu* discusses the importance of communal participation which is also difficult for the severely mentally disabled people to maintain, it should be noted that this moral theory has a profound role to play because it also recognizes the substantial value of human life. *Ubuntu* stipulates the right way of living with others in the community. For examples, it says any action that is not promoting the welfare of other people in the community is not acceptable. It encourages the harmonious ways of living with other people without disrespecting anybody. Thus, this style of living encourages people to engage in mutual aid, and to act in ways that are reasonably expected to benefit each other in an inclusive manner for all human beings without attaching certain attributes to them.

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