

Normative Personhood: African and Indian Perspectives

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Key Claim

*Salient African and Indian views of personhood treat the **normative** component of personhood as **necessary**...and this is due to certain **ontological** assumptions.*

- IOW, on these views, a person is not a 'person' unless he/she respects certain ethical norms.
- And these ethical norms are grounded in assumptions about how morality is woven into the very structure of reality.

Assumptions

- 1a. There is such a thing as 'Indian philosophy'.
- 1b. There is such a thing as 'African philosophy'.
 - i.e., there is more than one philosophical tradition (not everyone agrees)
2. Philosophy informs culture (and vice versa).

Clarification: My approach is *philosophical*, not doctrinal.

Why?

- Deepest questions of philosophy:
 - ‘Know thyself.’; ‘Who am I?’; ‘How should I live in the world (with others)?’
- Comparative Philosophy:
 - The project of philosophy can be enriched through engagement with a multiplicity of philosophical traditions.
- A Global Ethic:
 - the promise of a ‘global ethic’
 - increasing cultural tensions

Clarifications

- I am not going to argue that any of the views I discuss represent ‘authentic’ modes of being Indian or African.
- I am not going to argue, today, that we *should* adopt these views in our respective societies, let alone globally. (IOW, not prescriptive.)
- Today, my interest in these views will be purely academic—for the most part.
- I will be conducting conceptual analyses of these views in order to investigate whether there may be important similarities between.
- Having said this, I will at the end of my talk acknowledge the real-world failures of these views to produce better individuals and societies through their respective (philosophically informed) cultures.

African Normative Conception of Personhood

- Ubuntu:

When we want to give high praise to someone we say, “*Yu, u nobuntu*”; “Hey, so-and-so has *ubuntu*.” Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, “My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up in yours.” (Tutu 1999:31)

- NB: There has been an explosion of literature on Ubuntu this century in English, and much of it attempts to secularize/naturalize Ubuntu (see, for e.g., Metz 2021).
- I.e., the trend in Western philosophical thought to jettison metaphysics is evident in much of this literature.

Ubuntu in Public Policy in South Africa

- White Paper for Social Welfare (1997)

The principle of caring for each other's well-being will be promoted, and a spirit of mutual support fostered. Each individual's humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through a recognition of the individual's humanity. Ubuntu means that people are people through other people. It also acknowledges both the rights and the responsibilities of every citizen in promoting individual and societal well-being. (12)

- The Moral Regeneration Movement, launched on 18 April 2002.
- *Batho Pele* ('people first') in service delivery

Religion in South Africa

- In South Africa, 85,3% of the population identifies as Christian, according to [the 2022 census data](#) (Stats SA 2023).
- 7,8% of the population claim to adhere to Traditional African religions.
- These stats can be misleading; in SA, ‘Christianity’ often *incorporates* Traditional African religions.
- See, for e.g., Forster 2013 on this ‘double consciousness’:

I became aware that members of my congregation would undergo two religious ceremonies for births, marriages, and deaths. With weddings, for example, there would be a “white wedding” (where the word “white” referred both to the historical naming of the practice of being married by a clergyperson in a church and to the white wedding dress that the bride was expected to wear) and an African traditional wedding ceremony that took place near the ancestral home of the couple... Something similar happened with funerals.
- *idlozi*: ‘Ancestral calling’; *Ukuthwasa*: ‘come out’ or ‘be reborn’

Table 2.10: Percentage distribution of population by religious affiliation/belief, Census 2022

Religious belief/ affiliation	WC	EC	NC	FS	KZN	NW	GP	MP	LP	SA
Christianity	85,6	86,1	97,8	92,7	74,9	95,5	86,1	89,1	86,8	85,3
Islam	5,2	0,6	0,8	0,5	1,9	0,3	1,6	0,5	0,5	1,6
Traditional African	5,3	11,0	0,7	4,9	13,6	2,3	6,0	7,8	6,3	7,8
Hinduism	0,2	0,1	0,0	0,0	4,2	0,0	0,7	0,1	0,0	1,1
Buddhism	0,1	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,1	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0
Judaism	0,2	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,1	0,0	0,0	0,1
Atheism	0,3	0,1	0,0	0,0	0,1	0,0	0,2	0,0	0,0	0,1
Agnosticism	0,3	0,1	0,0	0,1	0,1	0,0	0,1	0,0	0,0	0,1
No religious affiliation	2,0	1,3	0,3	1,3	3,4	1,2	4,1	1,8	5,1	2,9
Other	0,8	0,6	0,4	0,4	1,8	0,5	1,1	0,6	1,1	1,0
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0

Note: Totals may not add up to 100 because of smaller figures that do not appear as a result of the one decimal place.

Source: Stats SA 2023

Oneness

- The Wise Woman in Credo Mutwa's *Indaba, My Children* (1998):
Man does not possess a special soul, exclusive to himself. All souls are the same, and Man is but one of the many forms, or re-incarnations that a soul must pass through. The soul of the impala that you have seen disappearing into a thick bush while walking in the forest may once have been a tenant in the body of someone you knew. The crocodile that nearly ate you while you were crossing the river may have been carrying the soul of one of your ancestors, or one of the enemies of your family. (565-566)

An African Normative Conception of Personhood: Key Takeaways

1. **Non-biological** grounding to personhood: Unlike in the dominant Western views, one does not accrue personhood simply via being born into the human species.
2. **Self-effort**: One must strive toward living ethically with others in order to obtain 'personhood' *because* one is in community with others (c.f. with hermeticism in many other spiritual traditions).
3. **Soteriological aim** underwritten by a specific **cosmology**: entrance into the Ancestral Realm; 'meaning-conferring cosmic moral order' (Singh 2023)—*Ma'at*

An Indian Normative Conception of Personhood

- Dharma:
 - *It all revolves around this.*
 - The ethical/normative aspect of Ṛta.
 - See, for example: Vivekananda's 'ontological ethics' (discussed in Mohanta 2016)
- 1. Sanathana Dharma (The Eternal/Perennial Way/Truth: the overarching (normative) philosophy)
- 2. Svadharma (individual purpose)
- 3. Manuṣyadharma (character)
- 4. Loka-Dharma (societal orientations)

An Indian Normative Conception of Personhood

- Advaita Vedānta
- What grounds (the) ethics (of personhood)?
- Vivekananda's 'ontological ethics' (discussed in Mohanta 2016)
- 'I ought to respect you because you *are* me.
- (Arguably) grounded in metaphysical views relating to an **Ancestral Realm, Ancestors** that guide one in this earthly life, and, similarly, **Elders** who have, through sufficient **striving**, acquired **personhood**.

An Indian Normative Conception of Personhood: Key Takeaways

1. **Trans-biological** grounding to personhood: Unlike in the dominant Western views, one does not accrue personhood simply via being born into the human species.
2. **Self-effort**: One must strive toward living ethically with others in order to obtain 'personhood' *because one is the other*.
 - Famous account of self-effort in the *Bhagavad-gītā*.
3. **Soteriological aim** underwritten by a specific **cosmology**: *Moksha* (i.e., emancipation from the cycle of birth and rebirth); meaning-conferring cosmic moral order (Singh 2023)—*Ṛta, Dharma*.

The End of Ubuntu/Dharma

- The end of ubuntu (Matalino & Kwindigwi 2013)
- ‘...ubuntu as a conceived ethical solution lacks both the capacity and context to be an ethical inspiration or code of ethics in the *present* context’ (*ibid*, 198; my emphasis)
- Against ‘revivalism’—i.e., ‘the project of pursuing *the narrative of return* as essentially couched in the search to animate an otherwise *outdated mode of being*’ (*ibid*, 201; my suggestion)

The End of Ubuntu/Dharma

- Here in India:

 - Inter-personal level

 - behaviour in traffic, toward pedestrians
 - non-acknowledgement of others when queuing

 - Socio-political level

 - How is the Dharma portrayed? How does it manifest in, say, public policy?
 - Can it truly be said that India is a Dharmic society? What sort of *social contract* exists?

- Contrast this with

 - Japan (order *because* empathy)
 - the West (certain social expectations relating to treating others with dignity)

Summary

1. Non- or trans-biological grounding to personhood
 2. Self-effort (*because* others)
 3. Soteriological aim underwritten by specific cosmologies
- If a coherent and implementable ethic is to be derived from these similarities, what may be required from philosophers (of all disciplines) is a return to the first principles (metaphysics, ontology) underwriting their respective cultures (see Bagginì 2019).
 - Long road to achieving this in practice in South Africa and India?

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