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# Are our parents our neighbours? An ubu-ntu perspective on the golden rule with regard to ageing

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## Modu wa taba

*Legae ke karolo ye botlhokwa ya setshaba. Tabakgolo mo taodishong ye ke go araba potjisho ye: na ke tshwanelo gore bana ba ishe batswadi ba bona kgole kua madulong a batsofe? Re araba potjisho ye ka go ganetja bana ba ba phedilego gabotse basa babjwe go isha batswadi mafelong a botsofe. Re tloga re bontsha le gore kgale-kgale gona mafatsheng a Bodikela gobe go na le motlhalefi bare ke Cicero. Le yena o kwana le kganetjo ye moka le moreti mogolo John Milton. Botee magareng ga bao ba phelago, badimo le bao ba sa tlo belegwa bo a senyega ge bana ba isha batswadi madulong a batsofe.*

## Abstract

Taking the African conception of community as our point of departure, we argue that the advancing age of parents is no justification for their children to transfer the responsibility of caring for their parents to others, such as to nursing homes. Usefulness is not the defining feature of the worth of an elderly human being, especially a parent. We will show by appeal to Cicero that this understanding was alive in Western antiquity and was upheld in the modern period by, for example, John Milton the poet. To send one's parents to a nursing home when one is in good health is to destroy and kill the triangular relationship between parents and children.

**Keywords:** Ubu-ntu; golden rule; parents; ageing

## Introduction

The kernel of the well-known Golden rule is that one ought to do unto others as one would wish to be done to oneself. This rule speaks to two fundamental points. The first is the principle of equality among and between human beings in our existential condition as human beings regardless of creed, sexual division as female, male, or hermaphrodite, and sexual inclination or preference for homosexuality or lesbianism. All human beings stand on the same horizontal plane of equality.

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The second point is the preferential option for reciprocity in the conduct of human relations. In practice, reciprocity manifests itself as concern and active care for the other human being. This includes the protection, respect, and preservation of the lives of all that lives alongside and together with human beings. Reciprocity thus encourages and promotes solidarity for the constant amelioration of the life of all that lives.

In the native language of the current author, Northern SeSotho (Sepedi), the two characteristics of the Golden rule mentioned above are rendered through the proverb '*motho ke motho ka batho*'. Proverbs that illuminate this point will be invoked in clarifying the meaning and practice of the Golden rule from the standpoint of the philosophy – indeed the philopraxis – of *ubu-ntu*. The current author has elaborated on the philosophical meaning of *ubu-ntu* elsewhere (Ramose 1999). Here we will provide only a brief explanation of this philosophy.

Our special focus is on the philopraxis of *ubu-ntu* with particular reference to the relationship between ageing parents and their children. The question to be answered in this context is: are our parents our neighbours?

### Who are our parents?

Many cultures of the indigenous peoples of Africa hold that any adult with a healthy mind and body is a parent to all the youth in their community. This custom is in some cases qualified by the requirement that an adult must have gone through the rite to be an adult through initiation training. The key criterion, however, is that one should be intellectually and physically mature to qualify as an adult with parental responsibility for the youth. Here blood relationship is unnecessary for the qualification to parenthood. This kind of parent is very important but not primary in our discussion of the question posed.

We find in West European history that in the past, parents often sent their children to monasteries, nunneries, or ecclesiastical institutions because of the economic difficulties of child-upbringing. Sometimes, parents – in many cultures – killed and buried their babies secretly shortly after birth. The reasons for the killings are multiple and varied, and include, for example, economic difficulty and ritual observance requiring human body parts, or the clandestine sale thereof for a variety of purposes. Parents who fall into this category often become headlines of daily news in different parts of the world. This kind of parents is excluded from the question posed.

The specific parent under discussion here is first the direct biological parent having blood relations with its child. Some parents in this category continue their concern and care of their children beyond the age of legal majority. Others renounce in practice their moral obligation to take responsibility for their children. This latter kind of parent is an important but certainly not primary concern of our discussion of the question posed.

The adoptive parent who adopted the child in its babyhood and raised it to at least legal age is also the specific kind of parent relevant to our discussion of the question posed. Spatial proximity to the children, especially at the tenderest age, is one very special feature common to both the biological and the adoptive parents. It is fertile ground for either the intensification of mutual affection between parents and children or the smouldering of mutual rejection.

The former manifests itself through nostalgia for the parental home when the children live away from the parents for a variety of reasons, including being at a boarding school. The recurrent visits to the parental home even when the children have their own homes is the continuing intensification of mutual affection between children and their parents. The reasons for the smouldering mutual rejection between children and parents ultimately resulting in outright denunciation may be ascribed to the failure to apply the golden rule. But where does the golden rule come from?

## Conceptions of the roots of parental responsibility

### *The African conception*

There are multiple and varied conceptions of the roots of parental responsibility towards their children. In the context of the indigenous African peoples conquered in the unjust wars of Western colonisation, the concept of community is indispensable to understanding the meaning and function of the golden rule. The community comprises of three dimensions, namely, the living, the living-dead ('ancestors'), and the yet-to-be-born. The living recognise the active presence of the living-dead in their daily lives. They are believed to be their guide throughout life and provide protection for them from evil and harm. This remains unchanged for as long as the living remember to perform the necessary rituals to maintain good relations between themselves and the living-dead.

When the living disregard or forget the performance of the good relations rituals, the living-dead may visit upon them reminder afflictions. Taking the afflictions seriously means performing appeasement rituals to restore the balance of good relations between the living and the living-dead. Doing so strengthens the obligation of the living towards the yet-to-be-born by being exempted from nulliparity. They are thus able to have offsprings that they ought to look after in gratitude and praise of the living-dead. This obligation to have children means doing the best possible so that the children shall have a comparatively better life than their parents.

Taking its point of departure as the community and the belief in the living-dead, the above reasoning takes good, harmonious relations with both the living and the living-dead as the root of parental responsibility: a responsibility with an ethical dimension imposing upon the parents the obligation to promote life and avoid killing (Bujo 1998: 77). This obligation is not limited to relations between and among human beings only. It extends to nature in its wholeness. This is the Golden rule of the ethics of the indigenous peoples of Africa conquered in the unjust wars of Western colonisation.

### *The Western conception*

There is a diversity of perspectives in Western culture on the roots of parental responsibility. For some, a child is a 'God given' blessing entailing the obligation to take responsibility for it. 'The justification of a right to fatherhood which Locke says is used by others is called traductionism [sic]. Locke's belief that the being or essence of a child comes from God is called creationism. Aristotle is standardly taken to be the father of traductionism' [sic] (Tully 1980: 58). This logic applies to motherhood despite the long history of the domination and oppression of women by men. On this view, to relinquish or renounce responsibility over one's child is an offence to 'God'.

Others consider that the very natural helplessness as well as the vulnerability of the baby is the root of parental responsibility. A parent who neglects its child at this very early phase fails to respond with a human heart. The line between parental responsibility and authority (power) over the child is rather blurred. We do not propose to move in the direction of examining the distinction between parental responsibility and authority.

Nor do we wish to expand such a distinction to a discussion of the difference between guardianship or custody over the child. The discussion itself would turn to the field of law. Once there, it could not avoid attention to the question of the legal relationship between wife and husband. This has changed radically in many legal regimes conceding equality to both husband and wife. Even so, Kant's attitude towards women remains hovering in the background. According to him, the obedience of the wife to her husband is natural. It is thus proper that it be supported by law (O'Faolain and Martines 1979: 297).

### The philosophy of *ubu-ntu*

Ubuntu is the root of African philosophy among the Bantu-speaking peoples. The African tree of ontology, knowledge, and ethics stems from *ubu-ntu* with which it is connected indivisibly. Apart from a linguistic analysis of *ubu-ntu*, a persuasive philosophical argument can be made that there is a 'family atmosphere', that is, a kind of philosophical affinity and kinship among and between the indigenous peoples of Africa. No doubt there are, and will be, variations within this broad philosophical 'family atmosphere'. But the blood circulating through the 'family' members is the same in its basics (Ki-Zerbo in De Tejada 1979: 304). In this sense, *ubu-ntu* is the basis of African philosophy. We will adopt a philosophical approach in giving an exposition of the philosophy of *ubu-ntu*.

In terms of geographic demarcation, we agree partially with the delimitation of De Tejada. The *ubu-ntu* philosophy we are about to discuss 'goes from the Nubian desert to the Cape of Good Hope and from Senegal to Zanzibar' (De Tejada 1979: 304). However, this delimitation is questionable since the Sahara desert is not the indelible birthmark of Africa (Davidson 1974: 28). For this reason, the meaning and import of human interaction before the birth of the Sahara desert must be taken into account. We shall not, however, pursue this line of inquiry in the present essay.

### Philosophy in *ubuntu*

It is best, philosophically, to approach this concept as a hyphenated word, namely, *ubu-ntu*. *Ubuntu* is actually two words in one. It consists of the prefix *ubu-* and the stem *-ntu*. *Ubu-* evokes the idea of be-ing in general. It is enfolded be-ing before it manifests itself in the concrete form or mode of ex-istence of a particular entity. *Ubu-* as enfolded be-ing is always oriented towards unfoldment, that is, incessant continual concrete manifestation through particular forms and modes of being. In this sense *ubu-* is always oriented towards *-ntu*. At the ontological level, there is no strict and literal separation and division between *ubu-* and *-ntu*.

*Ubu-* and *-ntu* are not two radically separate and irreconcilably opposed concepts. On the contrary, they are mutually founding in the sense that they are two aspects

of be-ing as a one-ness and an indivisible whole-ness. Accordingly, *ubu-ntu* is the fundamental ontological and epistemological category in the African thought of the Bantu-speaking people. *Ubu-* as the generalized understanding of be-ing may be said to be distinctly ontological; whereas *-ntu* as the nodal point at which be-ing assumes concrete form, or a mode of being in the process of continual unfoldment, may be said to be the distinctly epistemological.

The word *umu-* shares an identical ontological feature with the word *ubu-*. Whereas the range of *ubu-* is the widest generality, *umu-* tends towards the more specific. Joined together with *-ntu*, *umu-* becomes *umuntu*. *Umuntu* means the emergence of *homo-loquentes* who is simultaneously a *homo sapiens*. *Homo sapiens* here speaks to the being with the right to exist – reason. Ex-is-tence is coeval with the right to reason (Gutierrez 1983: 101).

*Umuntu* is the specific concrete manifestation of *umu-* which continues to conduct an inquiry into be-ing, experience, knowledge, and truth. This is an activity rather than an act. It is an ongoing process impossible to stop unless motion itself is stopped. On this reasoning, *ubu-* may be regarded as be-ing becoming and this evidently implies the idea of motion. We propose to regard such incessant motion as verbal rather than the verb. *-ntu* may be construed as the temporarily having become. In this sense *-ntu* is a noun. The indivisible one-ness and whole-ness of *ubu-ntu* means, therefore, that *ubuntu* is a verbal noun.

Because motion is the principle of be-ing, for *ubu-ntu* do-ing takes precedence over the do-er without at the same time imputing either radical separation or irreconcilable opposition between the two. ‘Two’ here speaks only to two aspects of one and the same reality. *Ubu-ntu* then is a gerund. But it is also a gerundive at the same time since at the epistemological level it may crystallize into a particular form of social organisation, religion, or law. *Ubu-ntu* is always a -ness and not an -ism. One of the many implications flowing out of this is that *ubu-ntu* is against dogmatism.

We submit that this logic of *ub-ntu* also applies to *hu-* and *-nhu* in the Shona language of Zimbabwe. Therefore, it may not be rendered as *hunhuism* as Samkange has done (Samkange and Samkange 1980). The -ism suffix gives the erroneous impression that we are dealing with verbs and nouns as fixed and separate entities existing independently. They thus function as fixations to ideas and practices which are somewhat dogmatic and hence unchangeable. Such dogmatism and immutability constitute the false necessity based upon fragmentative thinking. This latter is the thinking – based on the subject-verb-object understanding of the structure of language – which posits a fundamental irreconcilable opposition in be-ing becoming. On the basis of this imputed opposition, be-ing becoming is fragmented into pieces of reality with an independent existence of their own. The philosophy of *ubu-ntu*, as explicated thus far, recognises separate entities in existence but its point of departure is not fragmentative reasoning.

Without the speech of *umuntu*, *Ubu-* is condemned to unbroken silence. The speech of *umuntu* is thus anchored in, revolves around, and is ineluctably oriented towards *ubu-*. The language of *umuntu* ‘relevates’, that is, it directs and focuses the entire epistemological domain towards the ontology of *ubu-*. This it does by the contemporaneous and indissoluble coupling of *ubu-* and *umuntu* through the maxim ‘*umuntu ngumuntu nga bantu (motho ke motho ka batho)*’. Although the English language does not exhaust the meaning of this maxim, it may nonetheless be construed to mean that to be a human being is to affirm one’s humanity by recognising the humanity of others and,

on that basis, establish humane relations with them. *Ubu-ntu*, understood as be-ing human (human-ness); a humane, respectful, and polite attitude towards others constitutes the core meaning of this maxim. *Ubu-ntu* then not only describes a condition of be-ing, insofar as it is indissolubly linked to *umuntu*, but it is also the recognition of be-ing becoming and not, we wish to emphasise, be-ing and becoming.

In this sense it is simultaneously a gerund and a gerundive since the latter is implied in the imperative, *nga bantu*. In other words, be-ing human as a mere ex-is-tent among others is not enough. One is enjoined, yes, commanded as it were, to actually become a human being but not in the biological sense. Thus one is commanded to be ethical, that is, to focus on goodness as the desert of another human being and to promote and protect such goodness. This is an ethical appeal.

What is decisive then is to prove oneself to be the embodiment of *ubu-ntu* (*bo-tho*) by behaviour. Judgement of human worth and human conduct is based upon *ubu-ntu*. The judgement, pronounced with approval or disapproval respectively, is invariably expressed in these terms: *ke motho* or *gase motho*. The affirmation or negation of *ubu-ntu* (*bo-tho*) is a metaphor for ethical, social, and legal judgement of human worth and human conduct. On this reasoning, *ubu-ntu* is a philopraxis; a philosophy in practice.

### **Ubu-ntu philopraxis – *motho ke motho ka batho* with reference to ageing parents Proximity between parents and children – foundation of making them neighbours?**

The proverb forming the title of this section has already been explained above. Here we focus on its meaning with particular reference to ageing parents. The relationship between a baby and its mother starts already in the womb. Here the relationship is primarily physical without excluding emotional and psychological bonds with the yet-to-be-born. At the physical level, the father is partially excluded by the dictate of nature having made it impossible for him to become pregnant. *Okporovu ma apitre 'ba ni*, meaning, the satisfaction of a pregnant woman is a child (Dalfovo 1997: 3). But the exclusion does not cancel or deny the father's contribution of the seed which together with the egg of the mother germinated into the baby. Seen from this perspective, the womb is a vital site of an indissoluble biological relationship between mother, father, and baby.

Once the baby is born, the triangular relationship continues with the emotional and psychological dimensions intensifying in the exercise of parental responsibility over the growing baby. The parents exert themselves to the utmost in their determination to provide for the baby in its trajectory of growth to adulthood. In the earliest stages, the parents are spatially or geographically closest to the child in the course of their living together under one roof. There is mutual care and concern, as even the child learns to do things with its parents and even 'assists' them. For some children, doing so may be understood as obedience to 'God'. For others, it is considered as prompting ignited by concern, care, and gratitude to those with whom one lives. In this site called home, emotional and psychological bonds either get stronger or weaker. Here we concentrate on the former. However, we recognise that both the strengthening and the weakening of the bonds share one thing in common, namely, spatial proximity. The pertinent question here is whether or not such proximity makes parents and children strangers, distant, far away people in emotional and psychological terms.

### Are our parents our neighbours?

The home situation described above calls seriously into question the claim that our parents are strangers to us, their children. This questioning is supported by the conventional wisdom that blood is thicker than water. If this be true then it is inconceivable that parents and children living under the condition of increasing fortification of emotional and psychological bonds can regard one another as strangers. The fact that in this triangular relationship there is ready and active willingness to be each other's keeper is enough to refute the claim that the members of the triangle are strangers to one another.

Our parents are not our neighbours in exactly the same sense as in the Biblical story of the stranger who fell victim to robbers and was eventually rescued by 'the good Samaritan'. From the perspective of African ethics, the members of the triangle under discussion here lived according to the principle that 'life is mutual aid' (Wiredu 2003: 93). This principle extends to other spheres of communal or social relations. For example, if someone disregards and absents herself or himself from festivities such as weddings or bereavements such as deaths in the community, when they invite members of the community to such events of their own, the almost foregone conclusion is that no one will attend.

This is far from being the exercise of revenge. Instead, it is a practical reminder that a sustainable communal life revolves around the principle that 'life is mutual aid'. Underlying this principle is the recognition that the relatedness of humans and other beings demands ethical recognition. It is the two-pronged ethical demand to recognise another human being as equal to oneself in their ontological status. Flowing from this is the second leg of respect for other human beings through the practice of protecting and promoting their well-being for the good of the entire community. The ethical picture becomes complete only when the entire environment or the position of human beings in the pluriversal order of things is taken into account.

Understanding the ethical principle that 'life is mutual aid' in the manner described in the preceding paragraph returns us to the African concept of community as the living, the living-dead, and the yet-to-be-born. The observance of this principle by the living reinforces and sustains balanced and harmonious relations with the living-dead and, at the same time, commitment for the well-being of the yet-to-be-born. Seen from this perspective, the loosening or breaking of any of the three angles of the ontology of the community results in imbalance and disharmony. Restoration of the balance and harmony is thus an ethical imperative to be realised in practice. On this reasoning, our parents, even as they are ageing, are not, cannot, and ought not to be our neighbours in the sense of strangers. This is the ethical meaning of *motho ke motho ka batho* in the moral philosophy of many indigenous African cultures, that is, the cultures of the peoples conquered in the unjust wars of colonisation by the West.

In his explanation of the love of neighbour based on the Biblical story of the Good Samaritan, Burggraave dismisses emotions as the basis of such love. He acknowledges 'reciprocity' in the sphere of friendship but discounts it as the basis of love of neighbour.

Instead, the love of neighbour starts from the objective givenness of the other who appears before me unannounced. It is precisely this 'external' appearance

of the other that signifies for me a commandment to face up to the other in his or her 'otherness', not because I am inclined towards out of a personal, emotional preference, but because the other appeals to me as such and thus as one suffering (...) also has a 'right' to my love. (Burggraave 2009: 83)

There is much to agree with Burggraave with regard to the preceding citation. Interesting for our purposes is his construction of the other as an 'external', a radical 'otherness' in its own right. Indeed our parents are 'external' to us insofar as they are separate individuals from us. They are indeed the other in their 'otherness'. But it is debatable if their spatial externality is equal to the enduring moral proximity they have with us, their children. Our parents do not reveal themselves to us only as the 'suffering' face. They also appear to us as the satisfied, happy face. Both aspects of their appearance can deepen and expand the moral proximity between us, their children, and them.

The moral proximity between the parents and their children erases their aspect as strangers in the sense of the stranger in the Biblical story of the Good Samaritan. It seems possible to support this standpoint by appeal to Burggraave's explanation of killing in relation to the commandment, 'thou shalt not kill': 'killing must not be understood only in its strict sense as the taking of life, but broadly as all forms of denial, forgetting, and excluding, whereby killing is only the extreme physical incarnation' (Burggraave 2009: 78). If parents or their children deny or exclude one another from the bond of their triangular relationship, they kill it. If they forget it they destroy the anamnestic character – the re-remembering quality of African philosophy. Thus placing our parents on the same moral plane as strangers whom we regard as neighbours is to weaken and destroy the living triangular relationship. From the point of view of ubuntu ethics, nothing illustrates this better than taking our parents to a nursing home.

### ***Motho gase mpshe, ga a jewe sesotho – the nursing home: waiting for death station***

The literal translation of the above Northern SeSotho proverb is that a human being is not like a sugar cane, good to be chewed for as long as it is sweet and thereafter to be thrown away as useless. The proverb is against the view that usefulness is the measure of the worth of a human being. It is the affirmation that there never is a time when a human being is useless for as long as he or she is alive. Growing old manifests itself by continual physical degeneration sometimes accompanied by multiple health problems. This by itself is a challenge to the able bodied to do their best to make the quality of life of the aged as satisfactory and happy as is humanly possible. The core of the challenge is: is it morally defensible to declare another human being, especially a parent, worthless simply because of physical infirmity? Why is the parent so worthless that they must be cut off from the daily life of their children by being sent to a nursing home to await death under the care of strangers? Is there no dot of gratitude in the moral radar of the children of ageing parents? These are some of the African ethical questions to the triangular relationship between children and their ageing parents.

The physical infirmity that goes together with ageing does not necessarily mean a decline in maturity. The contrary is often true. Being the repository of vast, varied, and deeper knowledge of things, especially on matters of human relations, many cultures

consider the aged as seats of wisdom. To consign wisdom to the nursing home is in a way to hurt oneself. It is to deprive oneself of the opportunity to advance intellectually with particular reference to prudence. Elaborating on this point from the standpoint of *ubu-ntu* ethics, Bujo argues that:

Parents and elders, namely, know better how life comes about and how it ought to be preserved, defended and passed on. Therefore, it is prohibited to expel parents and elders even, and especially, when they are old and weak. ... Here, it should be stressed that in case an old person is not able to enrich the community anymore either by wisdom or by any other service, it is an unavoidable task to continue giving this old person further life because respect is shown to the ancestors, to whom he/she is near, by honouring his or her dignity and position. (Bujo 1998: 201)

The 'unavoidable task' posited by Bujo was recognised earlier by John Milton in his poem 'On his blindness'. One of its famous verses is: 'When I consider how my light is spent'. He concludes it thus: 'They also serve who only stand and wait' and, we wish to add, *they also serve who only sit, sleep, and wait*. Having dealt with the three items that were presented to him to reflect upon with regard to old age, Cicero turned to the fourth one, concerning death. Part of his response is worth quoting as it has a bearing on Bujo's 'unavoidable task' mentioned in the preceding paragraph. 'But the most desirable end of life is that which comes while the mind is clear and the faculties are unimpaired, when Nature herself takes apart the work which she has put together. ... Nature is the agent best fitted to give dissolution to her creature, man' (Cicero 1923: 72-74).

## Conclusion

Taking the African conception of community as our point of departure, we argued that the attainment of old age is no justification for children to transfer their responsibility for their parents to others, especially by sending them to live in a nursing home. Usefulness is not the last word on the worth of an aged human being, especially a parent. We have shown by appeal to Cicero that this understanding was alive in Western antiquity and was upheld in the modern period by, for example, John Milton the poet. To send one's parents to a nursing home when one is in good health is to destroy and kill the triangular relationship between parents and children.

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