

A Report on Ubuntu

by Leonhard Praeg

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Leonhard Praeg's book, *A report on Ubuntu* treats the question of "What is Ubuntu?" in a unique and illuminating fashion. The book begins with an approach that repositions Ubuntu by drawing a crucial distinction between what we *mean* when we ask the question "What is Ubuntu?", and what we are *doing* when we ask this question; Praeg shifts his focus to the latter. This crucial distinction escapes the gaze of many scholars of Ubuntu, and this book makes this gaze the basis of the entire discussion. This gaze (as an approach or method of doing Ubuntu) emphasises the political nature of asking this question over the primacy of meanings and argumentation for various understandings of Ubuntu, without in any way shying away from engaging the latter. It is not that the meaning of Ubuntu is unimportant, but the significance of this concept must be understood with reference to the political context. In other words, as a pre-condition for any meaningful conversation about Ubuntu, the political context must be brought to the fore and investigated. This book presents, in a fresh and fruitful way, this political nature (the blind spot of Ubuntu discourse) and reality that eludes many a discourse on Ubuntu.

I structure this review as follows: I advise the reader that I take a snapshot rather than a holistic approach to this review. The latter would have traced the aims and fundamental questions the book raises, and the arguments with which it responds to these questions, as well as the new questions it brings to our attention. To do so would require more space than is available. By 'snapshot', I mean that I will almost randomly select, reflect and comment on themes and issues that caught my eyes as a scholar of Ubuntu. Furthermore, I will limit my focus to the first part of the book, which is concerned "with understanding conditions under which we have come to think and write about Ubuntu in certain ways, as well as different political stances we assume in the process of imagining its place in contemporary, post-apartheid South Africa" (Praeg 2014: 135). I focus

on the first part since it is of immediate interest to me, as a scholar of Ubuntu, and because I am not an expert on issues pertaining to jurisprudence which largely occupy the second part of the book. I begin by considering the book's introduction of what it terms a "critical humanism". Secondly, I consider the book's distinction between Ubuntu and ubuntu. Lastly, I examine the book's treatment of Ubuntu as a glocal phenomenon.

Any philosophical discourse is concerned as much with the subject matter in question as with the method it uses to discuss the issue in question. Often scholars turn a blind eye to the effect of the walking stick on their journey (method). A discourse that styles itself as 'A report on Ubuntu' must necessarily and urgently clarify the method used to discuss Ubuntu. Typically, many a discussion about Ubuntu reduces or treats this notion as merely a conceptual issue that can simply be exhausted by elaborating on or clarifying concepts and maxims such as 'I am because we are', or 'A person is a person through other persons' (see, for example, LenkaBula 2008: 375–94, Louw 2004, Metz 2007: 369–71). This book begins by drawing our attention to our shared humanity, a subject that is "incomprehensible to most of humanity" (Praeg 2014: viii). Or, put differently, the question of what Ubuntu is, both practically and conceptually, is not obvious. An approach that reduces Ubuntu to a mere conceptual problem is grossly inadequate. To make sense of "What is Ubuntu?" requires that we ask questions as to why this question matters; why do we ask this question now, and for whom does this question matter? In other words, we must examine the political background or space that allows or makes it possible for us to have conversations about Ubuntu. This book uses a method that prioritises politics as first philosophy.

A meaningful discussion about Ubuntu must recognise that to talk about

Ubuntu is never simply an intellectual investigation, a way of saying things, but first and foremost a way of conducting ... politics, of doing things ... or ... ubuntu is first and foremost a political act and that our responsibility lies precisely in recognizing this priority of the political (Praeg 2014: 5).

Furthermore, Praeg (2014: 15) notes that to ask "What is Ubuntu?" is not simply posing a question, but making a statement about power, representation, discursive dominance, subversion, and so on" (15). This method of discoursing about Ubuntu is best summarised by the slogan that "everything is political", and that every scholar of Ubuntu must expose this political incubator that grounds the discussions, controversies, frames, epistemologies and ontologies that create certain meanings of Ubuntu or reject others (Praeg 2014: 11).

To best illustrate the political nature of discourses on Ubuntu, Praeg invokes certain historical instances or examples. For example, he draws our attention to

the case against Julius Malema for singing *Dubul' iBhunu* (*Shoot the Boer*). The judge in this case appeals to Ubuntu (a normative standard regarding which there is no consensus) rather than strictly invoking legal injunctions to make a ruling. In this light, he notes many Black people's discontent at the suggestion that Ubuntu is about them having to give up something (Praeg 2014: 15). He further observes that if Ubuntu is about our shared humanity (brotherhood of human being), this very same discourse is subverted to exclude the sharing of material resources to make possible the sharing of humanity (Praeg 2014: 18, 63). Another interesting political site is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which produces a Christianised Ubuntu. The TRC represents a machinery that engineered a political condition that imbued African people with an exceptional, accepting and forgiving humanity; this happened at the cost of sweeping the injured humanity of African people under the rug and protecting the material status quo. It is for this reason that, twenty years into democracy, there still exists a different spatial occupation for different races and economic inequalities between different racial groupings.

One interesting theoretical dangling of Ubuntu in politics is its implication in the project of modernity and its subtle racism. Typically, when scholars want to elaborate on Ubuntu, they appeal to the maxim 'I am because we are'. This dictum, coined by John Mbiti, was a response to the Western conception of personhood ('I think, therefore I am') (Mbiti 1970: 141). Descartes captures a modern conception of individualism, which is rationalist at heart. In the work of Mbiti and many other scholars who have followed his lead, the African, in this instance, makes sense of what it means to be African (Ubuntu) in light of a modernity that was responsible for colonisation in the first instance. In other words, in the process of distancing themselves from modernity and aspiring for decolonisation, Africans find themselves parasitic or complicit in the very modernity that corrupted their history and their conception of their humanity. In other words, an African following Mbiti's lead must first understand what the West is and then construct his/her identity as the "Other" of the West: the Western is individualist and the African is communitarian. In other words, the Western script provides the fundamental script for considering what it means to be African. Or, as Praeg (2014: 102) lucidly observes, "the distinction between the fact and the copy has been so eroded to the point where it can no longer be invoked to assert a meaningful difference". In this instance, Praeg is elucidating on the archivist conceptual personae. A 'conceptual personae' roughly represents a way of thinking and being, or writing about Africa, that is, the epistemological and ontological nets that inform or constitute various ways of configuring questions and answers about being and thinking (Praeg 2014: 95–100). In this instance, he is commenting on the fact that many an African scholar has to depend on Western archives in order to make sense of Africa. In other words, to make sense of the pre-colonial reality, he has to go to the copy, which is the Western library.

For example, to refer to ubuntu as ‘communitarian’ is to insert ubuntu within a debate between liberalism and communitarianism, with obvious implications for what ubuntu turns out to mean. This fact escapes the attention of many an African writer as he tries to make sense of an African project by drawing on the inventions of Africa by the West, by relying on its scripts and archives. This book’s method of understanding politics as the first philosophy aims to expose this political activity that makes a discourse on Ubuntu possible and even universal.

1. Ubuntu as critical humanism

To talk about Ubuntu is to make descriptive or even normative claims about being human or to imply some humanism (Gyekye 2010). Typically, many a scholar of ubuntu reduces it to some theory or ideology about humanity. This book resists being seduced by the theoretical (philosophical) reductionism that limits Ubuntu to this or that normative feature, be it friendliness (Metz 2009: 52), self-realisation or perfection (Shutte 2001: 14; Bujo, 2001: 5), spiritual harmony (Murove 2007: 188), or transcendental care (Molefe 2014)¹. In his effort to “reposition Ubuntu in the more cosmopolitan terms of critical humanism”, as Praeg (2014: 8) puts it, he also resists the strategy that would reduce Ubuntu to a device in service of the calculations, ploys and ends of the politics of the day. Although Ubuntu is useful in many a context, even in the present political space, it cannot be reduced to it; it must, somehow, always be transcendent, that is, represent possibilities about and for our humanity in making sense of it.

Talk of Ubuntu as critical humanism is one way of asserting the primacy of politics in the discourse on Ubuntu. As Praeg (2014: 12) would opine, “[w]ithin this frame (Ubuntu as critical humanism), the word ‘critical’ refers to the primacy of the political ...”. In this sense, critical humanism, unlike common humanisms that focus on some facts about being human as primary, treats the human (-isms) concerns as secondary; it focuses or prioritises the political, that is, “the relations of power that systematically exclude certain people from being considered human in the first instance” (Praeg 2014: 12). Thus, a discourse on Ubuntu emerges in a context that is marked by its political exclusions: the Black people in South Africa, for example were denied of their humanity, and if it was granted, this humanity was of a different, inferior kind (Praeg 2014: 12).

In this sense, talk about Ubuntu finds an expression that hardly appears in the literature, namely Ubuntu as power. Talk of Ubuntu as associated with power

1 I defend such a view in my doctoral thesis which is being examined as I write this review.

represents a struggle by Black people to assert their identity and the meaning of their existence as legitimate – it is a struggle for recognition and having a voice about one's existence (Praeg 2014: 14–5). One interesting way of exposing this understanding of ubuntu as power is in terms of an interesting contribution that Praeg makes to the debate on personhood. Typically, in the first place, the debate on personhood is about who takes priority, the individual or the community and, secondly, it is about the role the community plays in the making of a person with Ubuntu or one who counts as a possessor of moral excellence or virtue (Praeg 2014: 44). Thus, the discussion is typically metaphysical and normative. However, there is no mention of constitutive violence or benevolent coercion (Praeg 2014: 66).

This book draws our attention to the power or the “benevolent coercion” that is involved in the making of a person who qualifies as having Ubuntu. Commenting on this power, Praeg (2014: 65) states: “At work here is a form of benevolent coercion, indoctrination, inculcation or perhaps simply cultural strategies of discipline, aimed at the reproduction of certain modes of being and belonging we have come to associate with Ubuntu”. In other words, to be truly human, a person has to subject herself to the mechanisms or technologies of the community that produces, accepts and endorses certain ways of being (living), a process that is accompanied by potential violence. If one fails to achieve the standards of ideal humanity, one will be referred to as “animals” or that “he is not a person” (Gyekye 1992: 112). Because Ubuntu is employed to advance particular political projects, it has been “sanitised”, “by expelling from the very meaning of Ubuntu any allusion, implication or manifestation of the coercive and/or ambivalent strategies historically deployed to humanize” (Praeg 2014: 66). When this talk of power, constitutive violence and benevolent coercion is missing, ubuntu is treated within a theoretical incubator, a political way of thinking and being that is reduced to a discourse about ““being-nice”” (Praeg 2014: 63). Talk of power and violence, as exemplified in the productions of moral excellence, is a step in the right direction. Had ubuntu been construed in this light, the TRC, for example, would have taken a different shape, or so I suppose.

2. ubuntu and Ubuntu

Within his political framework of thinking (and being) about Ubuntu, Praeg (2014: 20, 45, 47, 52) introduces a crucial distinction between ubuntu and Ubuntu. In this distinction, ubuntu refers to “a cultural praxis” (it is a historical practice or an activity of producing particular kinds of human beings, those who have ubuntu, if they succeed) and Ubuntu refers to contemporary “philosophical practice” (theories and ideologies that attempt to make sense of the pre-colonial lived experience of the African people in the secular, global and contemporary

space. This distinction is important, since it draws our attention to several insights overlooked by common treatments of ubuntu while assuming their truths. The first is that – and this also affects this book – there was a time when ubuntu was lived in pre-colonial Africa and we do know what that is. However, what is lacking is the empirical evidence to that effect, or worse, given that a great deal of the historical data was produced by colonialists or by those associated with such a project – the copy/fact dilemma of the archivist approach to ubuntu discourse alluded to earlier. The fascination with a pre-colonial history of and about ubuntu becomes an assumption that informs all discourses on Ubuntu. Those who talk about ubuntu on the basis of this assumption also believe that there was one way of having ubuntu south of the Sahara, among the Bantu people, a claim that is too simplistic to account for the complexity and heterogeneity of lived experience of any people and at any epoch.

Praeg (2014: 47) discusses another problematic assumption, namely the belief that one can abstract Ubuntu from the values of ubuntu as a lived experience and that this theory can be applied to other places other than the African people – it can be a gift to the world. This leaves one wondering: "What about the residual dimensions of Ubuntu praxis that do not make it into this reinvented Ubuntu?" This question is interesting, because it implies that every form of ubuntu implies a process of loss of some aspects of ubuntu – we only have fragments in the various theoretical postures that Ubuntu assumes. These fragments, as captured by different theories (Ubuntu), are also derived from fragments about what ubuntu as a lived experience meant, since nobody has the total empirical picture – we draw from some incomplete source/s.

The force of this distinction is captured more vividly when we consider the expansion, secularisation and globalising of ubuntu as Ubuntu. Now we have to imagine what was experienced in pre-colonial Africa, and see how this can be applied to the townships, into a democracy and to the globe. In other words, ubuntu is stretched beyond the region of its origin, and this *stretching* of ubuntu has implications for Ubuntu and the different meanings attached thereto. This stretching implies finding differing and competing "master-tropes" and/or "frames" to express ubuntu in a language that reflects the new territories within which it is applied (Praeg 2014: 24, 43).

This stretching of ubuntu by creating its meanings, by drawing from epistemological and ontological frameworks (Praeg refers to these as frames or master-tropes) dominant within modernity, leads to the last issue on which I want to comment: Ubuntu as a glocal phenomenon. Praeg (2014: 37) reasons as follows:

To call Ubuntu a glocal phenomenon means recognizing that global discourses (Christianity, Human rights and so on) give a particular expression to the meaning of local traditions such as ubuntu, but in a way that also allows the resulting Ubuntu to feed back into the global discourse as a locally based critique and expansion of those very discourses. The result, as I argue, is that Ubuntu is neither here nor there, neither simply from 'over here' nor reducible to what is 'over there'. It is at once here and there.

To understand Ubuntu as glocal in a dynamic and strange place – the post-apartheid and postcolonial Africa – allows Ubuntu to be both African and unAfrican at the same time without being implicated in a contradiction. Only ubuntu can rightly and strictly be referred to as African, but Ubuntu, which is a response, critique and engagement with modernity is at home both in Africa and in the global space, as it draws on and takes the different epistemological and ontological frames to negotiate its place at both a local and global level. In the traditional lifestyle of a village or pre-colonial Africa, ubuntu was not a problem for thought, it was a lived experience supported by various technologies of power and symbols of community engagement. The breaking of this tradition and its recollection in the colonial space, as resistance and as expression of struggle for liberation, plunge us into the glocality of Ubuntu.

To conclude, to talk of Ubuntu as critical humanism is to stretch, expose and rethink the potentialities of being human without overlooking and critically engaging the political stakes and struggles that make possible the discourse on Ubuntu in the first place. To draw a distinction between ubuntu and Ubuntu is to expose ourselves to the loss brought on by the betrayal and destruction of colonialism, that is, the history embodied in the lived values of African people; it is also to create the possibility for rethinking Ubuntu and making a philosophical home in a tradition (modernity) that denies or rejects traditions (histories and values of African people and others). To talk of Ubuntu as a glocal phenomenon is to rethink the urgency of African identity and its politics by allowing the local to understand itself within the global, simultaneously serving as a critique of and participation in modernity; it is to think of ubuntu as a thing of Africa and its past, but also to embrace the opportunity to deal out its fragments and remnants through the dish of Ubuntu.

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