Ubuntu:
'You are because I am' or
'I am because you are'?

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Abstract
The concept of Ubuntu has become very popular in democratic South Africa and is all things to all people. It is seen as good in itself and of itself and is advocated as an indigenous and better alternative to imported ideologies from outside the continent. It comprises world views, economic systems, political order, culture, and social praxis. However, the concept is not yet fully articulated; neither is the phenomenon fully circumscribed and mapped. In other words, Ubuntu is an evolving concept and phenomenon. Current debates on Ubuntu focus on its collective or community dimensions and responsibilities and emphasize reciprocation as fundamental to an Ubuntu worldview. There is also an implied and expected indebtedness of persons to the community which gives them their identities.

This paper examines the implications of Ubuntu at the level of the individual and the likely direction in which it will propel political behaviour in South Africa. The paper argues that how Ubuntu is conceptualized at the personal level is important for any society professing it as an ideology. It is important whether the individual reads Ubuntu as 'You are because I am' or 'I am because you are'. The paper argues that the perspective to/of the self is critical for what kind of political order Ubuntu will generate, nurture and sustain.

Keywords: Ubuntu, individuality, collectivity, community, personal leadership

Introduction

Ubuntu is many things to many people including social scientists, historians and historians of ideas, philosophers of ideas, software developers, politicians, and community members. It is also different things to different people. It has been seen as an African worldview, doctrine, ideology (McAllister 2009), philosophy, ethic, community-based mind-set (Olinger *et al.* 2007), and culture among others. It is said to be the 'basis of African communal cultural life' (Tambulasi & Kayuni 2005: 147). It has been advanced as underpinning politics, business, corporate governance, justice, conflict resolution and reconciliation in South Africa (Olinger *et al.* 2007). It is both an ideology of justification and an aspirational idea.

As a worldview, Ubuntu is characterised by such basic values as 'humanness, caring, sharing, respect and compassion … warmth, empathy, giving, commitment and love … alms-giving, sympathy, care, sensitivity to the needs of others, respect, consideration, patience and kindness' (Msila 2008: 69-70). In this paper we view Ubuntu as a value system expected to inform human behaviour in the context of the treatment of others, especially the treatment of the governed by political leaders.

This article is divided into seven sections. Given that the paper interrogates the implication of the conceptualisation of Ubuntu for political behaviour, the first section – as a logical necessity – provides a working definition of Ubuntu. The definition draws from the multiple meanings and contending perspectives of the notion. Arising from the definitional imprecision and complexities associated with Ubuntu, section two attempts a synthesis of the core elements of the idea. The third section briefly highlights the aspects of individuality and collectivity in the narratives on (the contextualisation of) Ubuntu. In section four, the paper briefly explores the interface between individuality (i.e. the self) and collectivity (i.e. the community). Section five focuses on the applicability of Ubuntu to politics in South Africa with reference to its articulation in the fundamental charter for societal organisation – the constitution. In section six, we examine the connection of Ubuntu to personal leadership as a prelude to the final section which explicates how the conceptualisation of Ubuntu (especially by leaders) engenders differentiated political outcomes.

Ubuntu: Definitional Complexity

Ubuntu is a complex and polysemous concept; or is it a term? A concept is an abstraction from reality; 'an abstract or general idea inferred or derived from specific instances' (*The Free Dictionary* 2012). If a concept, what reality does Ubuntu refer to or represent? What are the instances from which we may infer or derive Ubuntu? If a term, how can it be transformed or formulated into a concept? Definitions of Ubuntu run the gamut from the denotative, connotative to constitutive dimensions. The definitions of Ubuntu are also largely imprecise if not outright vague; often cast in terms that themselves need to be defined. Be that as it may, we will make the effort to highlight some of the ways in which the concept has been defined. Words have their origins in language; therefore the place to begin the exploration of the definitional complexity of Ubuntu is the languages of east and southern Africa that birthed the concept.

Ubuntu or its equivalents are said to be indigenous to the languages of east and southern Africa even as the phenomenon itself is claimed to be original to these regions. Ubuntu is a word from the Nguni language family comprising isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiSwati and isiNdebele spoken in southern Africa (Binsbergen 2001). Still in the southern African region Ubuntu has a Shona equivalent, *hunhu* (Binsbergen 2001). Ubuntu counterparts in East and Central Africa include,

> *umundu* in Kikuyu and *umuntu* in Kimeru, both languages spoken in Kenya; *bumuntu* in kiSukuma and kiHaya, both spoken in Tanzania; *vumuntu* in shiTsonga and shiTswa of Mozambique; *bomoto* in Bobangi, spoken in the Democratic Republic of Congo; *gimuntu* in kiKongo and giKwese, spoken in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola (Kamwangamalu 1999: 25).

Ubuntu lacks a simple and a generally agreed upon definition. Over the years Ubuntu has been described as 'human nature', 'humanity', 'humanness', 'manhood', 'goodness of nature', 'good moral disposition', 'virtue', 'the sense of common humanity', 'true humanity', 'reverence for human nature', 'essential humanity', 'the kindly simple feeling for persons as persons', 'manliness', 'liberality', 'a person's own human nature', 'generosity', 'human feeling', 'good disposition', 'good moral nature', 'personhood',

'politeness', 'kindness', 'real humanity', 'personality', 'the characteristic of being truly human', 'greatness of soul', 'a feeling of wellbeing', and 'capacity of social self-sacrifice on behalf of others' (Gade 2011: 307-308). Gade (2011) shows that Ubuntu has been written about for over a century; however, this has not made the definition of the concept less problematic as the various terms in which it has been described indicate. Gade identifies five broad phases in the definition of Ubuntu: from 1840-1960 Ubuntu was defined as a human quality; from 1960-1980 Ubuntu was defined as something either connected to, or identical to, a philosophy or an ethic; in the period 1980-1990 Ubuntu was defined as African humanism; and from the late 1990s Ubuntu became seen as a worldview. Ubuntu became connected to and defined in terms of the proverb '***umuntu umuntu ngabantu***' translated as 'a person is a person through other people' ' only from 1993. Since then Ubuntu has been associated with variants of this proverb in various southern African languages.

The South African Ubuntu Foundation defines Ubuntu by means of a list of the various things/aspects of the phenomenon. It holds that Ubuntu

> Is the potential for being human.
> Is to value the good of community above self-interest.
> Is to strive to help people in the spirit of service.
> Is to show respect to others and to be honest and trustworthy.
> Ubuntu regards humanity as an integral part of the eco-systems that lead to a communal responsibility to sustain life.
> Ubuntu shares natural resources on a principle of equity among and between generations.
> Ubuntu is fair to all.
> Ubuntu is compassionate.
> Ubuntu is a collective respect for human dignity.
> Ubuntu refers to people.
> Ubuntu is one of the things that you recognize when you experience it (Foundation 2012a).

It argues that Ubuntu 'embodies a distinctive worldview of the human community and the identities, values, rights, and responsibilities of its members. in one short word, it is about "WE" – not "me"' (Foundation 2012b). The core belief of Ubuntu is that 'people are people through other

people', this being of Ubuntu from isiXhosa in which it is expressed as '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye abantu*'. This way of defining the concept leaves it too broad and open-ended. It tells what Ubuntu is about and what Ubuntu does or is expected to do more than it does what Ubuntu is.

Scholars have not fared much better in defining Ubuntu. One scholar who set out to address the question, 'What is Ubuntu?' declared at the end of his exposition that there is no 'definitive answer to the question' (Praeg 2008: 384). After reviewing definitions of Ubuntu from different perspectives Kamwangamalu (1999: 27) offers the following definition:

> Ubuntu is a value system which governs societies across the African continent. It is a system against whose values the members of a community measure their 'humanness'. These values, like the Ubuntu system from which they flow, are not innate but are rather acquired in society and are transmitted from one generation to another by means of oral genres such as fables, proverbs, myths, riddles, and story-telling.

We can surmise from this definition that Ubuntu is a standard of measure by which the members of a community evaluate individual and collective behaviour or conduct in the dimension of humanness and that it is an acquired or learned value; no one is born with Ubuntu. Among the core elements of the Ubuntu value system are communalism and interdependence.

Ubuntu has also been defined as a capacity, a consciousness and a natural desire besides being a value system. Thus Nussbaum (2003a: 2) holds that

> *Ubuntu* is the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining community with justice and mutual caring. *Ubuntu,* an Nguni word from South Africa, speaks to our interconnectedness, our common humanity and the responsibility to each other that flows from our deeply felt connection. *Ubuntu* is consciousness of our natural desire to affirm our fellow human beings and to work and act towards each other with the communal good in the forefront of our minds.

An Attempt at Synthesis: The Core Elements of Ubuntu

The enumeration of the elements of Ubuntu points to various dimensions of the concept. Ubuntu is a belief system and comprises an indeterminate set of values, principles, goals, strategies, technology, and methodologies. Among the core values of Ubuntu are communalism, interdependence, compassion, empathy, respect, and dignity. Ubuntu also espouses principles such as equity, fairness, reciprocity, inclusivity, 'sense of shared destiny between peoples' (Murithi 2007: 282), hospitality, responsiveness, and harmony. The cardinal goal of Ubuntu is harmonious relationship among peoples and generations for the good of all. Ubuntu aims at community building, bonding people in a network of reciprocal relationships.

Contextualising Ubuntu: Individuality and Ccollectivity

In Cartesian thought individuality is contrasted with collectivity and identity entails not only uniqueness but also separateness from the community. Ubuntu discourses also juxtapose collectivism and individualism, but not as incompatible opposites. Rather the purpose in Ubuntu discourses is to emphasize the relatedness of the individual and the group and how each finds meaning and fulfilment through the other. Psychologists refer to the process whereby an individual becomes separate from the community and develops an identifiable and distinctive personality as individuation. According to Brooke (2008: 39), individuation in Jungian psychology has two meanings. It refers to

> a process in which one becomes increasingly undivided against oneself, complete rather than perfect and a 'separate, indivisible unity or whole'… individuation is a process in which one becomes separate from identification with the collective – both the collective unconscious of childhood and the collective consciousness of one's culture, to the extent that this is merely the collective unconscious made visible.

Individuation involves the withdrawal of projections and 'taking personal responsibility for one's psychic life and recognizing that the greatest moral and spiritual conflicts are within one's own soul' (Brooke 2008: 39).

One becomes an individual by proper incorporation into the community through initiation rites and participation. Individuation is the formation of personhood. This process is critical not only because from it emerges the individual members of a community but also because the content of values on which relationship with the other is based are acquired in the course of this process. Community solidarity does not detract from individual dignity, the right of a person to respect from others.

The most common interpretation of Ubuntu as 'a person is a person through other persons' has important implications of personal responsibility. First, the individual must define himself in relation to other people and his relationships with them. This will entail a delicate balancing act in which he will ensure that all parties in relationship with him and whose contributions make him are accorded the regard and credit due to them. This weighting or balancing act is most difficult to say the least, but no less difficult, is the distribution of rewards such that none feels cheated or betrayed. Let us take one example. In Zulu culture children born out of wedlock belong to their mother's family and their upbringing often turns out to be the responsibility of their maternal family.

A second implication is that the individual must avail himself to making others become persons through him. In making himself available to make others become persons does the individual do so on the terms of 'the others' or does he do so on his own terms? Is the relationship communally defined and determined or does the individual have any moral autonomy? Kwame Gyekye (2002) argues that the community is prior to the person and provides the context in which the individual person relates with others. According to Gyekye (2002: 301),

> [t]he community alone constitutes the context, the social or cultural space, in which the actualization of the possibilities of the individual person can take place, providing the individual person the opportunity to express his/her personality, to acquire and develop his/her personality and to fully become the kind of person he/she wants to be.

In his influential work, *Politics*, Aristotle argues that the community is prior to the citizen and that without the community there is no citizenship. According to Aristotle (1999: 6),

> the state is by nature clearly prior to the family and the individual, since the whole is of necessity prior to the part; for example if the whole body be destroyed there will be no foot or hand except in an equivocal sense as we might speak of a stone hand; for when destroyed the hand will be no better than that.

A situation in which the community determines what the part of the individual person in the community is, and what he can become does not seem to leave much room for self-expression. However, this will be a wrong reading of the situation. We should understand both Aristotle and Gyekye to mean that an individual realises her/his fullest potential only as a member of a community, that is, in the context of relationships with other individuals. As Aristotle adds '[t]he proof that the state is a creation of nature and prior to the individual is that the individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing; and therefore he is like a part in relation to the whole' (Aristotle 1999: 6). But what is the nexus between the part (self/individuality) and the whole (community/collectivity)?

Exploring Ubuntu: The Interconnectedness of Self and Community

In Ubuntu discourse self and community are inextricably connected but also somewhat contrasted. Thus one writer has opined that 'Ubuntu sees community rather than self-determination as the essential aspect of personhood. People are distinctive beings, able to recognize and acknowledge each other through mutual encounter and cultural integration' (Nussbaum 2003b: 22).

The individual is involved in different layers of relationships, spreading outward in concentric circles from the self through family, community, and various layers of non-ascriptive and spatial relationships to the world at large. While the community is taken to be paramount in Ubuntu literature, it is our contention that relationship to the self is critical to being a proper and well-rounded member of the human community, whether primary or secondary. The relationships emphasized in the Ubuntu literature are characterized by reciprocity. While relationship to the self has not received the effort it deserves, it has been captured in the idea of respect for the other

and the demand that all be accorded dignity as human beings. The relationship of a person to the self does not deny interdependence; neither does it posit independent self-sufficiency. Rather it can be described as autonomy of the individual to act according to his convictions and interpretations regarding the values of the community.

Ubuntu and Politics in South Africa

Does Ubuntu constitute a foundation of politics in South Africa? Is it a factor in South African politics? According to Nkondo (2007: 88),

> [t]hough many of South Africa's national policies are concerned about the cultivation of humanity, nowhere do they make *Ubuntu* central to the foundation, process and goal of economic growth and social development; nowhere are *Ubuntu* principles the principal context and focus of the business of the state.

However Olinger, Britz and Olivier (2007) make a contrary argument and point out that Ubuntu has informed politics, business, corporate governance, restorative justice and conflict resolution and reconciliation.

To answer the first question it is necessary to refer to official documents including the constitution of the country while the second question requires an examination of the behaviour of public office holders.

Ubuntu does not appear in the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa but appeared in Chapter 15 of the Interim Constitution of 1993 dealing with general and transitional provisions under a postscript titled national unity and reconciliation.

> This Constitution provides a historic bridge between the past of a deeply divided society characterised by strife, conflict, untold suffering and injustice, and a future founded on the recognition of human rights, democracy and peaceful co-existence and development opportunities for all South Africans, irrespective of colour, race, class, belief or sex. The pursuit of national unity, the well-being of all South African citizens and peace require

> reconciliation between the people of South Africa and the reconstruction of society.
>
> The adoption of this Constitution lays the secure foundation for the people of South Africa to transcend the divisions and strife of the past, which generated gross violations of human rights, the transgression of humanitarian principles in violent conflicts and a legacy of hatred, fear, guilt and revenge.
>
> These can now be addressed on the basis that there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for *Ubuntu* but not for victimisation (Constitutional Court of South Africa n.d.).

This epilogue to the Interim Constitution has become a fundamental aspect of the jurisprudence of South Africa (Bennett 2011).

However, it remains to be seen how much ubuntu is accepted as a basis for political action among the majority African population. The racial divide remains and is being reinforced and inequality is rising rather than abating. Could Ramose be right in holding that ubuntu is an imposition by the political leadership as a price for majority rule? According to Ramose (2003: 487),

> ubuntu was included in the interim constitution to justify the necessity for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Yet, the necessity for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission cannot be to be the expression of the will of the conquered people of South Africa. This is because the necessity was a unilateral decision by the political leadership of the conquered people. The people themselves were not consulted ….

So though the Constitutional Court anchors decisions on ubuntu, ubuntu does not appear in the constitution neither was it debated among the black population as s basis for action in post-apartheid South Africa. Ramose (2003: 487) actually claims that the appeal to ubuntu came from the 'conqueror' who 'used it tactfully to remove the cause of its own fear'. Some recent comments in the media echo a feeling of a sense of betrayal among some blacks regarding the terms of the settlement that ended apartheid rule in South Africa. For example, an open letter to former President Nelson

Mandela by a certain 'Youngster', claims that Mandela sold out the blacks (Youngster 2012). According to Sam Ditshego of the Pan African Research Institute, the claim 'that Nelson Mandela sold us out, is true' (Ditshego 2012). Linda Ndebele and Batho Makhubo (2012) shared similar sentiments in an open letter to Mandela published in 2009, arguing that 'the ANC government, since your presidency of the country … is sustain apartheid settler colonialist war machinery against the African masses'. There also seems to be prevalent in the population a desire for retributive justice instead of the restorative justice principle that underpinned the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Ubuntu may therefore not be the widely held belief among the people of South Africa that President Jacob Zuma's recent use of the term suggests.

Ubuntu: Personal Leadership

Leadership is an activity; it is the activity of leading. In general, leading presupposes following, and leadership presupposes followership. Generally speaking, leadership entails another, who must accept to be led before there can be a leadership relationship. This concept of leadership requires an organisation as a context for performance and a position in the hierarchy of such organisation. This kind of leadership derives from one's designation or role in the organisation and is therefore positional. Within the framework of organisations, personal leadership is one of many styles of leadership – the way an individual manager exercises his authority and power.

Personal leadership does not refer to the personalisation of leadership position, rulership, or political power by presidents and prime ministers. It is not self-entrenchment or the perpetuation of self in public office as so often happens in Africa. It is also not the concentration of the powers and resources of the state in the hands of rulers and their families and supporters (cronies). Actually *personal leadership does not require a formal organisation to operate*. Personal leadership is also not limited to the political sphere or the national level. Essentially, personal leadership entails acting on one's convictions and taking responsibility for the consequences and outcomes of one's conduct. It means setting examples for others to follow rather than waiting for others. In the context of meeting the needs of a community, personal leadership means taking action in that regard. Personal leadership is leading by example.

Personal leadership may refer to the behaviour of people in leadership positions in organisations. It may also apply to individual conduct at the personal level. This latter concept makes it very similar to personal responsibility. Let us state a few definitions of personal leadership as a background to establishing how the Ubuntu construct depends on it.

According to Kempker (2009: 6), 'personal leadership is not about the position that you might hold – it is about how you choose to act'. In other words, it refers to the personal behavior of leaders in performing the responsibilities of professional leadership, including demonstrating expertise, building trust, caring and sharing for people, and acting in a moral way (Mastrangelo *et al.* 2004: 436). Personal leadership 'focuses on authentic self-expression that creates value'; it 'proposes a principle-centred, character-based, inside-out approach to change and leadership'; and 'reiterates the truth that there are universal laws and principles which govern one's natural and social existence. These principles are an integral part of every individual. Honesty, fairness, dignity, service and excellence are examples of such principles' (Verrier & Smith 2005: 52).

From the above definitions personal leadership, though exercised in relationships, is not about reciprocity. Personal leadership involves taking autonomous action, choosing to act in a particular way instead of another, not in reaction to what another has done but on the basis of values held dear. The fact that Ubuntu manifests in relationships and emphasizes communalism and interdependence should not obfuscate the dangers inherent in reciprocity. Ubuntu is about responsiveness more than reciprocation. This is why it emphasizes forgiveness, reconciliation, harmony, and restorative rather than retributive justice. And this is why every community member needs to live an Ubuntu life style for there to be a culture of Ubuntu.

Leadership is fundamental to the practice of Ubuntu. The current scholarly and popular attention Ubuntu enjoys is partly the result of political leaders articulating Ubuntu as the basis of African humanity and as a key instrument of forgiveness and national reconciliation. There is a growing body of literature on Ubuntu as a management and leadership principle. Ubuntu is also cardinal to the exercise of leadership especially in developing societies such as those in Africa. However, only a few African leaders have availed themselves of Ubuntu as a doctrine of leadership (Ncube 2010). This perhaps accounts for the endemic corruption and kleptomania found across the length and breadth of the continent as well as the sit-tight syndrome of

many political leaders, which have contributed significantly to the underdevelopment of African states. Therefore, ethical and transformational leadership can contribute immensely to the attainment of community, national and continental developmental goals and objectives. African nations have not lagged in goal setting as their various national development plans, white papers, and public policies show. The problems of Africa have been with the execution of plans. In the realm of responsibility, the (in)actions of political leaders and public servants may be indicative of the extent to which they have internalised the elements of Ubuntu and whether or not they are guided by these elements. For example, the dumping of textbooks in rivers in Limpopo Province of South Africa in 2012 and the provision of the open toilet system in the Western Cape and Free State provinces also in South Africa speak volumes about how much Ubuntu values inform the behaviour of some public officials in South Africa. In the context of this paper, these actions raise a fundamental question: if these public officials understand or profess Ubuntu, is there a conceptualisation of Ubuntu (as explained in the next section) that offers insights into their behaviour?

'You' or 'I'? Implications of the Conceptualisation of Ubuntu

The phrase 'you are because I am' registered only 99 hits on Google Scholar while 'I am because you are' registered 467 hits. Neither phrase appears in the title of any article or book; they appear only in the body of the text. It is clear going by the hits that the latter phrase is in more popular use than the former. It is also clear that these phrases are not in wide use in academic writings. 'I am because we are' is a bit more popular, registering 1,740 hits on Google Scholar. However, Google search engine registered over 1.28 billion hits for 'I am because you are' and about 6 million hits for 'you are because I am'. 'I am because we are' recorded close to 4 billion hits. But why are we making this digression into statistics? We want to suggest that the lack of scholarly engagement with our key terms belies the importance of these terms in a proper appreciation of the conception of the self in Ubuntu political practice and constitutes a cause for concern.

It is instructive that the phrase 'you are because I am' is the least popular of the three but the politics of most African countries, especially when it comes to resource allocation, conceives the 'self' to be more

important and deserving of attention than 'the other'. It has been argued that governance that is based on Ubuntu will be characterised by accountability and transparency, equality, promotion of peace, self-reliance, and a commitment to the promotion of the public good in the disbursement of public resources (Tambulasi & Kayuni 2005). Indeed Tambulasi and Kayuni (2005) hold that Ubuntu political practice is very much compatible with democratic governance and the promotion of social welfare.

The expression 'I am because you are' can be interpreted as 'I am who I am because of you or who you are', acknowledging the contribution of the other in the making of the self. The emphasis is on the role of the other in the becoming of the self. Operating on this concept, one will prefer the other to the self because without the other there is no self. In contrast, the concept 'you are because I am' makes the existence of the other dependent on the self (me) and therefore for the other to become, I must be. In other words, if I am not, the other is not also and cannot be. The valuation I place on the other in these two concepts are different. In 'I am because you are' the other (you) is the essence of my existence and being while in 'you are because I am' the self (I) is the centre of one's existence and being. These concepts will impact differently on decisions one makes as a person; which of the two concepts I hold will be reflected in what I give consideration to in the choices I make. It will also determine the position I will take with respect to the consequences of the outcomes of my decisions and choices.

The other may also view the choices I make with reference to whether they benefit me more than they should. Ethical principles will likely easily be invoked to show how partial or balanced my choices are, depending on whether and how the commentators will be affected by the benefits accruing from the choices and decisions I make. With respect to holders of public office, their allocation of resources among the various interests in society will very much be viewed in terms not only of efficiency but also fairness and equity; in particular whether they directly benefit from the performance of the duties of their office through family members, business associates, and friends.

The popular notion of Ubuntu as 'I am because we are' skirts around the problem of responsibility among community members. Who does 'we' refer to? Does it refer to all the members of the community? The traditional African community comprises the dead, the living and the unborn. Does 'we' refer to the three segments of the membership of the community or does it

refer only to the living in reality? We are of the opinion that the notion of 'I am because we are' needs to be broken down into its key elements for a proper articulation of Ubuntu as a way of life. It will not be going too far to suggest that African historiography emphasizes individual achievements as well as individual rights to positions.

Furthermore, the conceptualisation of Ubuntu by members of society, if at all they subscribe to it, impinges on one's humanity and the forms that interpersonal and intergroup relations take. It has repercussions for the exercise of and respect for personal rights/civil liberties. It accentuates or undermines commitment towards the execution of responsibilities associated with one's position in society. Fundamentally, it determines the dominant character that the society assumes. It is instructive to note how South Africa's president, Jacob Zuma, emphasized the implication of the lack of Ubuntu for society. Zuma argues that '[w]ithout respect and *ubuntu*, members of society become hooligans'. With reference to the recurrence of violent protests in South Africa, Zuma notes:

> We believe that all human beings are equal and important … that they must be respected by virtue of their humanity .... Once we lose respect for one another and ubuntu, what type of society will we be? .... If we build a society without these two, we are building a society of hooligans …. If we do not agree as people, let us argue with respect and not by violence, saying whatever we like to people … That does not build a nation. South Africans are not hooligans. We are a nation of very proud respectful people who stand up for their rights but do so without losing dignity and Ubuntu (*Mail & Guardian* 22 September 2012).

Zuma's remarks presuppose that one's perception and treatment of the 'other' is reflective of one's belief in and acceptance of Ubuntu and the extent to which it informs one's behaviour in private and public spheres. However, as we have argued here, it is necessary to interrogate not just the individual's acceptance of Ubuntu and its utility as a guiding principle, but the individual's conceptualisation of the notion with reference to the relative emphasis on the self in relation to the 'other'. His remarks also assume that there is a common understanding of ubuntu among the people of South Africa. This assumption is very far from the truth regarding people's

understanding of ubuntu as the often disparate meanings adopted by different scholars indicate.

Conclusion

This article has examined the implications of the conceptualisation of Ubuntu at the personal level and how it propels behaviour. As noted earlier, Ubuntu is plagued by definitional imprecision; it is used to describe an assortment of values. This makes Ubuntu susceptible to politicisation. That said, the core elements of Ubuntu suggest that it could serve as a moral compass and as a guide for political behaviour, especially in the South African context. However, as we have argued here, the extent to which Ubuntu serves these ends is a function of an individual's conceptualisation of Ubuntu and how such formulation finds expression in action. Incidents such as the dumping of textbook in rivers and the provision of open toilets, which the South African Human Rights Commission construed as a violation of human dignity (Rawoot 2011) may well illustrate the lack of (appreciation for) Ubuntu, or a rhetorical commitment to it. Or it may be that the relevant public officials do not define their own humanity or dignity through the humanity and living conditions of those affected by their actions. Clearly, the contradictions of resounding Ubuntu rhetoric in South Africa and (political) behaviour that detracts from the humanity of others underscore the need for critical reflection on Ubuntu and how it is conceptualised.

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