

Research Article

The Ubuntu Approach to Building Restorative Justice

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Abstract

Ubuntu, a philosophy originating in southern Africa, presents itself as a humanist paradigm centered on the interdependence between people and the inherent dignity of every human being. Its fundamental premise—"I am because we are"—expresses a worldview that privileges community, empathy, solidarity, reconciliation, and forgiveness as foundations for social coexistence. This paper analyzes the significance of Ubuntu as a philosophy of life and its potential as a conceptual and practical framework for restorative justice, especially in contexts marked by exclusion and structural violence. Drawing on the historical experience of South Africa and the role played by leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, this article examines how Ubuntu was articulated as a political and ethical instrument to confront the collective trauma of apartheid, prioritizing reparation over punishment. In this process, five fundamental pillars were consolidated: self-knowledge, self-confidence, resilience, empathy, and service, which constitute a methodological foundation also applicable to other social realities. The article proposes a reflection on the implementation of Ubuntu in restorative justice practices in juvenile justice. In this field, it is observed that practices inspired by this philosophy allow for the restoration of bonds, the transformation of damaged relationships, and the promotion of processes of accountability, reparation, and social reintegration. Significant psychological and social benefits are also reported. Finally, it is proposed that Ubuntu should be an open approach, adaptable to diverse cultural contexts, and capable of offering innovative responses to contemporary challenges in justice, inclusion, and peacebuilding. Its practical application requires an ethic of care, servant leadership, and an active commitment to rebuilding the common good, making it a valuable tool for addressing conflicts from a deeply humanizing perspective.

Keywords

Ubuntu, Restorative Justice, African Philosophy, Community, Reconciliation, Youth in Conflict with the Law, Ethics of Care, Social Transformation

1. Presentation

Ubuntu as a life philosophy. Its transcendence and the importance of its implementation in restorative justice. Empathy, solidarity, reconciliation, fraternity, forgiveness, and plurality: Ubuntu is a compendium of the philosophy of respect that has been fundamental for the resistance and prosperity of numerous communities, especially African ones, which have been threatened in recent times by devastating

humanitarian crises. Below, we will briefly explore the meaning and transcendence of Ubuntu and its impact on contemporary society to reflect on how I could, in my case, apply the philosophy of Ubuntu in the contexts in which I operate in my country, whether at work or in one of the three socializing pillars (family, school, or community). Additionally, assessing the impact it would have.

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2. Ubuntu, the African Humanism

Ubuntu is the African philosophy of respect. It is about the connection of the individual with the community and this with the land through a notion that presents itself as a fabric of integral brotherhood in which no one is left out, in which no one is left behind, because if one individual loses, everyone loses, because if one individual suffers an injustice, everyone succumbs. Ubuntu is the golden thread that weaves the African soul and makes it shine before the eternal threat of the predator, highlighting the collective responsibility towards the well-being of the community and emphasizing the importance of empathy, compassion, and mutual respect.

Originating from the Xhosa and Zulu languages, which in turn derive from Bantu, Ubuntu is a notion that nurtures the sense of collectivity of sub-Saharan peoples. In the face of selfishness and individualism, Ubuntu proposes a way of life that is supportive, fraternal, and respectful of others through proverbs such as 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' which translates to 'I am because we are', 'you are, therefore I am'. This emphasizes the interconnectedness between all human beings and the importance of community in individual identity.

This honest, tolerant, and generous relationship with others is presented as the foundation of an inclusive society where differences are neither an impediment nor an obstacle to progress: on the contrary, they drive it forward, assuming that social progress is the sum of all individuals who are part of a community.

Thus, Ubuntu is a sort of integrative network that, translated into our Western language, would connect the local with the global, a sustainable network that ultimately links communities with the land, with nature: a complete and incorruptible harmony between the individual, the collective, and the natural environment. Ultimately, it is the African humanism that continues to dazzle the rest of the world with its resilience, as we like to say on this side of the planet.

3. Ubuntu as a Bridge to National Reconciliation

The impact that this philosophy has had on society has been immense: Ubuntu has influenced politics and justice in Africa, especially during the transition from authoritarian regimes to democracies in countries like South Africa. It has been used as a foundation for national reconciliation and the construction of more inclusive and equitable societies. Until the early 1990s, South Africa experienced a painful and traumatic social situation marked by apartheid, a system of racial segregation that created separate areas for blacks and whites, whose true aim—to maintain power for the white minority—was disguised as progress for all communities.

The emergence of leaders like Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, inspired by Ubuntu, managed to end the tragedy, preventing another perhaps greater by redirecting the rage and

desire for revenge towards national reconciliation: along with Gandhi's non-violent resistance or satyagraha, one of the greatest social achievements in contemporary history.

In this sense, and in the face of an extraordinarily delicate situation that could have turned into a conflict with catastrophic consequences, Desmond Tutu revived the humanistic notion of Ubuntu to strengthen a commitment to restorative justice, instead of retributive.

As the anthropologist from the University of Granada, Ester Massó Guijarro [1], states in her study on the relationship between Ubuntu and human rights, the construction of South Africa's future was built on the conceptual pillars of Ubuntu: self-knowledge; self-confidence; resilience; empathy; service.

In practice, Ubuntu guides the ethical and moral behavior of individuals as it is expected that people show generosity, hospitality, and support towards other members of the community. Thus, believing in the fundamental principle that affirms the equal dignity of each person, a dignity that is absolute and unconditional, as well as the value of life, we are all called to action to defend the vital essence and promote and restore human integrity. Additionally, its practice involves recognizing human diversity as a gift, believing in unity within ethnic, cultural, political, or religious diversity because 'We are the branches of the same tree.' We belong to multiple identities and have an autonomy in construction. It is from this mix that our individuality is formed, but always within a community.

In this way, instead of a revenge that would not represent a liberation for the victim, but rather a new prison, one opts for reconciliation with the guilty party, for the forgiveness of the offender, assuming that he too is part of the community, because everyone, even the 'guilty', has their role in social harmony. It is not about forgetting, but about forgiving to grow together: a paradigmatic historical example of the immense potential of the philosophy of Ubuntu applied to a social dilemma with complex resolution.

Nevertheless, and despite its extraordinarily positive connotations—or perhaps precisely because of them—Ubuntu has also been described as a philosophy invented without real roots in the African worldview, an artificial universal African value, "independent of the real historical context of the societies that practiced it," as noted by the researcher at the Center for African Studies at Stanford University, Michael Onyebuchi Eze [2].

And it is important to remember that, often, from a Western perspective, there is a tendency to decipher Africa as a whole historical and social entity, when it is actually a sum of peoples with enormous differences. In this regard, and with this critical view, Ubuntu is presented as "a political magic wand to weather each new social crisis," as Onyebuchi [2], himself points out.

To overcome this, a genuine exercise of cultural diversity is required, encouraging each nation to have its own interpretation and practice of Ubuntu adapted to its unique cultural context.

4. Ubuntu, Painting the Colors of Our Gazesis

Is it possible to transfer Ubuntu to Western society? Is our liquid society ready to stop the fierce competitiveness, the culture of hate, and the constant heartbeat of revenge for a social (and spiritual) reconstruction based on forgiveness, solidarity, and brotherhood? We know that we are beings in constant evolution and that the possibility of making good flourish within us does not disappear in any of us. Just as the risk of making mistakes does not disappear in any of us. The line that separates good and evil runs through the heart of every person.

Without ignoring the wounds caused by the legacy of so many offenses to human dignity that the world has known, from slavery to anti-Semitism, from persecution for political, religious, or ideological reasons to racism, from gender violence to discrimination based on sexual orientation, among others, it is evident that we have a heavy inheritance that, in some cases, is still very present among us. We must be aware that there is a long way to go. Only when we discover in each person a brother, equal in dignity and a partner in building a common future, can we grow in humanity. There is a strong need to learn to love that permeates those of us who inhabit dehumanizing landscapes in our daily lives.

Starting from the concept 'I am because you are, I can only be a person through other people,' with which Desmond Tutu and other authors established the meaning of Ubuntu, it becomes possible to identify, while respecting the unity of the concept, an 'I' and a 'you' and even a 'we' ('other people') mediated by a vital and constitutive relationship. This process of creation - of 'I am' - simultaneously recognizes, without contradiction, that I exist by myself and, at the same time, depend on the relationships that constitute me, two dimensions that are inseparable. It is from this understanding that it is feasible to outline the option - because it is a choice, and therefore an alternative among several - to choose five dimensions that will dialogue with each other and that are also understood interactively: self-knowledge is the starting point to which one returns permanently and in which new inner landscapes are discovered; this is complemented by self-confidence in the conviction that only through it can a balanced and fruitful personal development be achieved. Then, as a realistic attitude towards obstacles and the inevitable failures and defeats, resilience is added as a structuring competency. Empathy is perhaps the most evident pillar of a method that arises from a concept structured on the basis of 'I relate, therefore I exist' and is closely linked to service, which, being a pillar of a different nature from the previous ones, gives them all meaning and purpose.

It is from the development of these pillars that from our perspective, the Ubuntu building can be erected, in which three levels are deeply interconnected: that of service leadership, that of the ethics of care, and that of bridge-building.

The vital context and philosophy of Ubuntu: the very arti-

sanal fabric.

From the place of the world I inhabit, I actively and resistively reject any expression of hatred and violence as driving forces of social transformation. Hatred dehumanizes us and makes us see the "other" in the category of "enemy", therefore, less human. I do not believe, categorically, that anything lasting can be born from violence. Only active nonviolence motivated by love and respect towards our opponents can bring about fair and sustainable change. We urgently need to learn how to love. As we have seen, notions like Ubuntu are the key that opens the door to the future of humanity.

Ubuntu is making others happy, those around you, to achieve your own happiness; it is to assume that the misfortune of others is your own misfortune and that the successes and abilities of others are not a threat, nor a I.

This phrase that explains this Ubuntu 'I am because we are' is clearly visible in our approaches since crime generates a series of damages to the victims, but it also breaks social cohesion; people feel less safe, distrust others, and stigmatize not only the offender but often their relatives as well, which of course, ends the social harmony. The work in this field their lives, and that is why empowerment occurs in them. Thus, the involved parties manage to externalize feelings and shed the fear of retaliation from the offenders or rejection from the victims towards others, they gain tranquility, feel supported, and gain confidence and security. This justice also understands that isolation does not favor reintegration, but rather takes humanity away from people, which is why it promotes reconnection with the community.

Certainly, addressing the needs of the parties allows for resolving the conflicting situation from the root because it creates common ground that contributes to the construction of constructive agreements. For the processes to be integrating and restorative, it is essential that, instead of promoting equidistance between the aggressor and the victim, conditions are generated to strip the parties of such labels. The only categories that participate in the restorative process are that of the one who acknowledges the harm caused and that of the one who feels destroyed or nullified by the other. As a result, many positive benefits arise: high levels of satisfaction among participants, decreased fear of victims, and reduced recidivism among offenders. Experience in this field suggests that restorative justice processes can have a positive impact on the overall well-being of a participant (both psychologically and physically): changes in trauma symptoms of victims, reduced levels of fear and distress, and diminished desire for revenge. For offenders, specifically, the psychological benefits of Restorative Justice are linked to the development of guilt, shame, and empathy, as well as changes in optimism, self-esteem, and hope. The motivation for personal transformation may include healing from wounds in their life history that contributed to their criminal behavior, the possibility of treating their addictions and/or other problems, the strengthening of their personal skills and abilities.

Our work also shows that on the scale of physical health there are significant improvements for both victims and offenders, such as the regulation of sleep, the normalization of eating habits, the promotion of physical activity, as well as the reduction of alcohol and/or drug consumption.

In conclusion, the process of restorative justice serves as a bridge for all participants to move from pain to calm, from disorder to order, from vulnerability to empowerment, and from isolation and disconnection to reintegration and reconnection with the community.

For this reason, and following Howard Zehr [3], three very important values of Restorative Justice that we apply in the task spaces are: responsibility (as a member of the community, if I do something wrong, I must take responsibility for this harm and do my best to repair it because by doing this, I am mending the broken bonds of the community of which I am also a part), respect (the way we relate to each other must be based on respect and empathy), and relationship (we are inevitably destined to connect, relate, and coexist).

The Ubuntu that permeates the Restorative Justice that we sow reminds us of the Three Musketeers and their motto: 'one for all and all for one.' For many, this may seem merely utopian, but it is a reality, especially for many young people who have historically been socially excluded. Ubuntu is, in short, the answer to the question: how do we want to build our future?

Author Contributions

Maria Gimena Funes is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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