

A Comparative Theological Approach to Virtue Ethics: Making Space for an African Perspective

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Abstract

The twenty-first century world has radically been defined by multiple crises, including wars and grandiose exploitation of the poor by those with political and economic power. To address these crises, one must turn to virtuous life notions. In doing this, society has to learn from different religious and cultural wisdom. Consequently, a case is being made in this work that African ethical thoughts can enrich Christian notions of the virtuous life. African philosophical and cultural notions of community are relevant to understanding the virtuous life in Christian theology as a constitutive aspect of what it means to be human.

Keywords: African thought, Cosmic harmony, Ethics, Sin, Ubuntu, Virtue.

Introduction

The claim to personal freedom epitomized in the overarching role of conscience as the final arbiter in moral issues needs to be balanced by a more humanistic approach rooted in the communal identity of the human person. If this balance is not stressed, morality can best be reduced to the realm of the private life; alien to any objective and critical evaluation initiated by communal humanity – a communality innate in all humans. The gravity of this emphasis on conscience plays out in contemporary democracies, particularly in Euro-American democratic societies, where collective existence is seen merely as one enacted by an ascent of individual wills that desire to be together for reciprocal utilitarianism. The current Covid-19 pandemic and the response to ways it can be curtailed justifies the need to revisit the meaning of virtue within the context of communion (*koinonia*). In the United States of America, for example, many disregarded the need to practice social isolation; some refused to wear masks; and some even refused to be vaccinated because for them, these regulations infringed on their individual rights. They forgot that the human person is an insular being, rather; the human person is a being in communion with other beings. Given this, Servais Pinckaers argues that; “moral theologians are themselves ...tempted to resolve problems of conscience by following the strongest current of public opinion. They base their judgments on apparently scientific studies that measure public opinion and reveal majority views, which are generally vested with an authority that is said to be moral” (PINCKAERS 2001, 57). It is my view that conscience in itself is not radically antithetical to the notion of communion. However, this communion is not enacted by a social contract. Every deliberation of conscience, even though it is an act of the individual, is always a human act. It is an act of the human person aimed at the common good. Because of this, we can even say some deliberations of conscience are erroneous because they fall short of the common good. If all moral

acts are reducible to individual deliberations of conscience, there will be no justification for claiming certain actions/decisions to be good or bad. But this is not the case. Even the concept of the common good evokes relationality and an affirmation of community. In other words, all human actions are shaped by and oriented towards the community. Stated differently, David M. Goodman and Eric R. Severson argue the following: “Thought does not begin with knowledge. Knowing and understanding arise from exchange, address, and a person in front of me – always saturated with the ethical. Said differently, it is our very boundedness to one another, our vulnerability of living in this world as fleshly and small, and the calling and address made by one another’s vulnerabilities that are the starting points of rationality, personhood, and subjectivity” (GOODMAN AND SEVERSON 2016, 1).

In this work, I intend to argue for a comparative theological model of viewing the virtuous life as one that has as its starting point the totality of the human person, which stresses communion as the pathway to achieving harmony. The idea of cosmic harmony central to most African cosmological awareness can be a way of looking at the virtuous life. The virtuous person is one who lives a life of harmony in such a holistic manner that the sense of dichotomy that has pervaded western notions of existence is either eradicated or made irrelevant.

A Christian Understanding of the Virtuous Life

Virtue, as the pathway to discipleship, is at the heart of the Christian message. This is reflected in the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council as the council attempts to make the Church and its mission relevant to contemporary society. In its words, “in the Eucharistic meal all are called to ... union with Christ, who is the light of the world, from whom we come, through whom we live, and towards whom we direct our lives” (SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL 1964, Web. N.P). At the core of Christian identity is the sense of communion. It is not a mere figurative expression devoid of concreteness; rather, it is the essence of who a Christian is. To be a Christian is to be a “People of God;” who not only share in the eternal Sinaitic covenant but who have been made sons and daughters of God through a spiritual adoption made possible by the Incarnate Word who is the “first born of all creation” (1 COR 1:15). This communal identity calls for accountability in following the Lord who reveals the Father to all. Tied to this is the mandate to be witnesses of Christ to the world and one another. Virtue is thus connected to witnessing. It is not an isolated witnessing but one that proceeds from this communal identity. Hence, the claim to Christian identity is verifiable by the communal awareness of what that means to the Christ People, who, throughout history, have laid claim not just to that identity but to what is within its boundaries.

A Christian is condemned to be communal. Thus, “He [God] has, however, willed to make women and men holy and to save them, not as individuals without any bond between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness” (SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL 1964, Web. N.P). This is central, first, to the Sinaic covenant with the House of Israel and, second, with all of humanity through the Incarnate Word. In the community of the people of God, one does not follow a path to God exclusively; rather, the very sense of holiness is always a collective one. The

holiness of the community affects the individual. It is the collective response to the covenantal demands with and through Jesus that guides the members of the covenant-people. "Participation in the body of Christ" is the domain of the virtuous life (HAUERWAS AND PINCHES 1997, 69). Participation "involves our reception of the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist, but also includes (and entails) immersion in the daily practices of the Christian church: prayer, worship, admonition, feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, etc. By these, we are transformed over time to participate in God's life" (1997, 69).

For Christians, any attempt to discuss the virtues without beginning with the Trinity only results in an absolutization of the human person. While humans are at the center of creation, they are not absolute. Only God is absolute. The virtuous life is life in and with Christ. An understanding of the Trinity can shed light on the virtuous life, which I believe is very much in line with an African understanding of harmony.

The nature of divine love is that it is extending or, better put, overflowing. Humanity is begotten from this overflowing love among the persons of the Trinity. Hence, the intimate connection between humanity and God when God said in God's plurality: "Let us make man in our image after our likeness" is eternally enacted (GEN 1:26). Humankind's response to this act of love constitutes a virtuous life. It is a response which must replicate the primordial invitation by the Trinity. Such a response by humanity cannot be a private one. It must be out-reaching, creative, and other-conscious. The human response is present in the divine mandate given to the primordial human to 'cultivate and care for' all of creation (2:15). The human person is not made to be self-centered but to preserve harmony in the created order. In doing this, the human person is to maintain and preserve the enduring divine communion enacted in the very act of their coming to be. All the virtues, be they love, justice, courage, happiness, hope, faith, or humility, cannot be understood as existing within the realm of the private. They are public since they enact communion with the Trinity and with the created order.

For Africans, a human being, who is alone and devoid of any real communion with another, is not a person. To be a person is to be in communion. A vital element in the Trinitarian persons is that they are eternally in communion with one another. If we are made in their likeness, it follows then that our personhood cannot be devoid of communion. Rather, it is a life lived with the life of the Trinity. To be virtuous, then, is to enact and make real communion with the divine and the human, which is at the heart of the Afrocentric notion of harmony in the cosmos.

The Humanness of Humanity

In an attempt to reiterate the Christian understanding of what it means to be human, the Second Vatican Council asked the question; "what is humanity?" (SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL 1965, Web. N.P). The Council draws its answer from the Genesis account of creation, which states that "God did not create men and women as solitary beings" (1965, Web. N.P). Rather, "from the beginning male and female God created them" (1965, Web. N.P). Strikingly enough, *Gaudium et Spes* continue to state that "their companionship produces the primary form of interpersonal communion. For by his [their] innermost nature man [the

human person] is a social being, and unless he [or she] relates himself [or herself] to others he [she] can neither live nor develop his [her] potential (1965, Web. N.P).

The Christian understanding of the social identity of humans is not external to their nature which they merely identify with; rather, it is a quality that constitutes the humanness of all men and women. To be human is to be communal. Directly opposed to this view is the Enlightenment bias for the individual in a manner that presents the individual within a scarce narrative of connectedness. What do I mean by this? The individual is defined through a narrative of erasure that, at best, affirms subjectivity at the expense of alterity. Alasdair MacIntyre opines that such a vision of the human reveals the moral bankruptcy that has defined the so-called “Enlightenment project.” In his words, “the problems of modern theory emerge clearly as the product of the failure of the Enlightenment project.

On the one hand, the individual moral agent, freed from the hierarchy and teleology, conceives of himself and is conceived of by moral philosophers as sovereign in his moral authority. On the other hand, the inherited, if partially transformed rules of morality have to be found some new status, deprived as they have been of their older teleological character and their even more ancient categorical character as expressions of an ultimately divine law...” (MACINTYRE 1984, 62). Continuing his critique of the vestiges of the moral consciousness articulated by the Enlightenment, MacIntyre writes the following:

Contemporary moral experience as a consequence has a paradoxical character. For each of us is taught to see himself or herself as an autonomous moral agent, but each of us also becomes engaged by modes of practice, aesthetic or bureaucratic, which involve us in manipulative relationship with others. Seeking to protect the autonomy that we have learned to prize, we aspire ourselves not to be manipulated by others, seeking to incarnate our own principles and standpoint in the world of practice, we find no way open to us to do so except by directing towards others those very manipulative modes of relationship which each of us aspire to resist in our own case. The incoherence of our attitudes and our experience arises from the incoherent conceptual scheme which we have inherited (1984, 68).

How then can one overcome this existential paradox MacIntyre has shed light on? A glimpse into the Trinitarian life serves as a legitimate starting place to articulate the human as constitutive of communion. Why the Trinity? I turn to John Zizioulas as he attempts to shed light on the trinitarian theology of the Cappadocians (Basil of Caesarea; Gregory of Nyssa; and Gregory Nazianzen) and its anthropological implications. He writes: “As it emerges from the way personhood is understood by the Cappadocian Fathers with reference to God... Nothing is more sacred than the person since it constitutes the ‘way of being’ of God himself. ... The person cannot exist in isolation. God is not alone; he is *communion*. Love is not a feeling, a sentiment springing from nature like a flower from a tree. Love is a *relationship*; it is the free coming out of one’s self, the

breaking of one's will, *free* submission to the will of another. It is the other and our relationship with him that gives us our identity, our otherness, making us 'who we are', that is, persons; for being an inseparable part of a relationship that matters ontologically, we emerge as *unique* and *irreplaceable* entities. This, therefore, is what accounts for our being, and our being ourselves and not someone else: our personhood. ... As a person you exist as long as you love and are loved" (ZIZIOULAS 2006, 166 – 167). Continuing in the same theological tradition of the Cappadocians, one can argue that the acts of human creation, redemption, and sustenance proceed from Trinitarian love. Love that is radically defined by freedom is at the heart of the human condition. To void this enduring and pervasive love, constitutive of what it means to be human, is to lead humanity into the path of sin. Sin becomes a loveless existence, an existence of loneliness. The first act of murder recorded in the Hebrew Bible points to this path of loneliness and radical individualism. Cain's words; "...am I my brother's keeper" points to the effect of sin on humanity's humanness (GEN 4:9). The extending nature of love, constitutive of humanity's humanness, is cut short by this selfish act of murder. Again, in every human encounter, communal relationality is present. Hence, when a person is in communion with another or with nature, communion with God and the self cannot be absent. If a relationship is devoid of this tripartite communion, there is a displacement of the person's humanness. The very disordered relationship of the primordial man and woman, when they decide to usurp the harmony of the ordered world and become what they cannot be, is a clear example. This affects not just their relationship with God, with themselves, and with nature. Hence, God proclaims to them the consequence of their action: "Cursed be the ground because of you! In toil shall you eat its yield all the days of your life..." (3:17-19) By their disordered action, the harmonious communion with nature is altered. The destruction also of the harmonious communion among humanity is made real by the first act of murder by Cain of his brother Abel.

Consequently, the virtuous life ought to be a negation of selfishness and radical individualism. In Christianity, the incarnate Word of God serves as an existential guide for all humans who are made in its image. All that the God-human has become is the condition of those made in its image. Since communion radically defines the life and identity of the God-human, those made in its image are also conditioned by communion. The prayer of Jesus Christ to His Father, "so that they may all be one..." (JN 17:21-23) does not only reveal to humanity the constitutive communalism inherent in its humanness but also the oneness of their goal. The goal is one because there is one humanity. In other words, to be human is to be gifted with divine communion, made possible by God's creative self-love.

Edward Schillebeeckx reminds one of a fact that contemporary virtue ethicists need to take into consideration when dealing with human nature. For him, the unity of the human person should be "based not from a biological substratum, but, by its very nature, on a community of persons, a *communio*... This means simply that human unity has its origin in oneness of vocation and destiny" (SCHILLEBEECKX 1965, 71). He continues by stating that "*Communio* among all men [humans] is the immanent human expression of this single vocation." Hence, "human unity in its essence is not a mere datum: it is a task to be carried out... Communion among men [humans] is the reflection, immanent in mankind's

[humankind's] history, of man's [human's] transcending communion with the living God..." (1965, 72). I am quick to add that this constitutive nature of humanity makes it possible for humans to be in communion not just with God but also with others. Agreeing with Schillebeeckx, the primordial mediatorship of Jesus points to the role of all humans in their relationship with one another. In Schillebeeckx's words, "Mankind [Humankind], then, has received salvation through the fraternal service of one chosen from among ourselves- Jesus Christ...Mankind's [Humankind's] new fundamental but real unity and new structure as a community rests upon God's universal saving will" (1965, 74). Every human by being in communion maintains, preserves, and brings about this fellowship of oneness by *being there* for the other. This entails being faithful to their vocations and taking risks for the other even to the point of dying. This is made possible by adhering to the traditions and value systems that help shape the response of one when the need arises to become a mediator. For a Christian, the story is the totality of the salvation history, which begins and continues in and through the perfect mediating sacrifice of Jesus Christ. He is there for his brothers and sisters (all creation) even before they become aware of the need for him.

Philosophically, Emmanuel Levinas well articulated this point in his critique of Western ontology and the affirmation of ethics as the first philosophy. In his words, "... I speak of responsibility as the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity. For I describe subjectivity in ethical terms. Ethics, here, does not supplement a preceding existential base; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility. I understand responsibility as responsibility for the Other..." (LEVINAS 1985, 95). For Levinas, the ethical orientation of identity is itself the constituent reality defining subjectivity. Consequently, he writes, "Subjectivity is not for itself; it is, once again, initially for another" (1985, 96). To be human is to be for the other as an ontological orientation. The human condition is thus to be understood as an orientation towards the other in an ethical manner.

World and Human Person

Is the world equivalent to a community of persons? This is an important question, especially when one considers the place of humans in the world. While humanity is at the center of the world, the world transcends any totalization by humans. Any treatment of the virtuous life that fails to situate the place of the world in such a study builds a system on a fragile foundation that is bound to collapse. On that note, it is appropriate to look at what cultural cosmologies have to offer to a life of virtue lived in the created world. My particular interest lies in the notion of harmony, which is central to many African cosmologies; unlike Western thought that tends to affirm dualism as a way of perceiving reality. Muriel Dimen articulates a critique of Western dualism in his evaluation of psychoanalysis. Dimen argues that "Dualism's separate-but-equal masks a hierarchy: the one behind the two is always on top. In the table of opposites that have been around since the pre-Socratics – for example, male-female, light-dark, reason-emotion, mind-body, nature-culture – one term is always implicitly better or higher than the other. Hence the usual deconstructive reading: a binary always conceals a hierarchy" (DIMEN 2003, 7; ARON 2016, 20 – 21). Jacques Derrida has made a

similar point as Lewis Aron noted. In his words: “Western thought, especially metaphysics, is based on dualistic oppositions that are often value-laden and ethnocentric, and that create a hierarchy that inevitably privileges one term of each pole” (ARON 2016, 20). An escape from this hermeneutic cycle that is inherently dualistic is offered by Derrida. By centering a “deconstructive strategy” in responding to the Western thought process, Derrida allows for a new way of speaking of reality. Reading Derrida closely, Aron offers the following insights: “deconstructive strategy does not rest with reversing dichotomies, but rather aims to undermine the dichotomies themselves, and to show that there are ‘undecidable’ items that do not belong on either side of a dichotomy. These ‘undecidables’ are ‘third’ terms. Deconstruction contends that in any text [or context] there are inevitably points of ‘undecidability’ that betray any stable meaning an author might seek to impose upon his or her text” (2016, 20).

In African thought, the virtuous life plays out in the community. One cannot separate the human person from the world as if they are antithetical to each other in African cosmology. I am using ‘African’ here not intending to create a false generalization but recognizing some prevalent trends in the Sub-Saharan region of Africa). Thus, as many African scholars have done, I argue that at the heart of an African worldview is the notion of harmony (see EHUSANI 1991; NYANG 1984). Such epistemological polarities between humankind and nature are absent in the African worldview. Rather, at the center of the universe are humans who are created and sustained by God, and who must constantly, in all their actions, cultivate harmony in their relationships with God, themselves, other humans, and non-humans. The virtuous life, then, for an African, is a life that constantly sustains and preserves the cosmic balance. For an African, God is not in some distant abode. Rather, God is radically present in the whole of creation – in the seen and unseen. This presence calls for maintaining a relationship characterized by transparency. Hence, as noted by George Ehusani; “the African reality structure is characterized by MAN-NATURE harmony, meaning *inclusiveness, interdependence, and totality*” (EHUSANI 1991, 109). Buttressing Ehusani’s view, Sulayman Nyang writes; “in traditional African thought, the need for harmony between man [humanity] and God, man and man [human and human], and man [human] and non-human elements in the universe has led to an ontological emphasis on the world of social values” (1994, 21). Again, both Ehusani and Molefi Ketii Asante agree that the African “world view is *holistic* – they [Africans] have a *synthetic* as opposed to the *analytic* approach to reality. The unity of the “whole” rather than the specifics of the whole interests the African” (EHUSANI 1991, 107; ASANTE 1987, 68). This unity lies in the human person. While this does not equate to an absolutization of humankind, an African worldview places humanity at the center of the created order with the duties and obligations of preserving the world and the multiple relationships with God, nature, the self, and other humans. Because of this, one can argue that to be a person is to be communal. One is called to be in communion with others.

For the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria, harmony in the universe is tied to right conduct by members of the community. The virtuous life is not striving to be in union with God in a form of mental assent; rather, it is rooted in having right relations with one’s neighbors and the creatures of the land. To go against the

norms that preserve the harmonious balance is to offend mother earth. Harmony in the cosmos shapes the virtuous life. Reciprocally, when the community is virtuous, there is harmony, and when there is harmony it means the community is virtuous. Rather than focus on what makes one virtuous, the African worldview focuses on the entire relationships of humans. A person is always a unity in the sense of communion. It is as a unity that humans attain their end in the African worldview. For the Ebiraland people of Central Nigeria, “the human person is a multitude (Ozavinoyi)” (EHUSANI 1991, 150). This “is based on the immense dignity of the human reality” (1991, 150). This “immense dignity and worth of human beings engenders them to seek to propagate their race. Personhood entails the capacity to increase and multiply- to become a multitude. Human fulfillment is realized when a person procreates and leaves behind him/her a multitude of people. Each person born into the world is, therefore, a potential multitude” (1991, 150).

Again, Asante notes that “African society is essentially a society of harmonies, since the coherence or compatibility of persons, things, and modalities are at the root of traditional African philosophy” (ASANTE 1998, 76). These enduring notions of harmony and connectedness in African philosophical thought are captured in the words of Adebayo Adesanya. He writes: “this is not simply a coherence of fact or faith, nor of reason and traditional beliefs, nor reason and contingent facts, but a coherence or compatibility among all disciplines” (ADESANYA 1958, 39). Put simply; “Life is drawn from persons, energy is found in the midst of persons, beauty inheres in persons, wisdom is acquired through relationship with persons, [and virtue is in communion]” (ASANTE 1987, 186; EHUSANI 1991, 221).

Relationality is at the heart of what constitutes personhood in African cultural, religious and philosophical thoughts. This point is encapsulated in the concept of *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* sheds light on the fact that life is itself relational. Thus, “human beings achieve their fullness in the community” of relational connectedness from which life emerges, is sustained, preserved, enhanced, and passed on (VERVLIEET 2009, 21). Stated differently, one’s personhood is tied to the wellbeing of the community. It is a covenantal relationship that seals the fate of the community to that of the individual and vice versa. Without the flourishing of the community, the individual diminishes and is unable to attain personhood, which is an identity of relationality. Both Augustine Shutte and Motsamai Molefe capture this point in their respective works. For Shutte, “I only become fully human to the extent that I am included in relationship with others” (2001, 24). For Molefe, “the possibility for personhood requires the agent to be continuously embedded in positive relationships with others” (2019, 61).

The Virtuous Life and Nature

As noted in the Genesis account of creation, the direct link between the virtuous life and the created order calls for attention. The virtuous life has both cosmological and transcendental dimensions to it. It is cosmological because it is grounded. It brings about the flourishing of the universe and preserves the harmony that pervades the created order from God's first act of creation. It maintains the enduring goodness in creation: “God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good.” (GEN 1:31). One can argue that the virtues in

themselves, when lived out, cannot be removed from their ties to the created order. The flourishing of the universe is tied to the flourishing of the virtues by the mere fact that the human person is not just part of the universe but is at the heart of the universe. Before delving further, it is important to state clearly that the locus of the human person in these webs of relationships that enhance and sustain life go beyond an anthropocentric focus. Thus, Ifeanyi Menkiti argues that “personhood refers to the communal goods or virtues internal to the practices of a community” where practices refer to “the collective resources at hand for the task of person-becoming” (MENKITI 2018, 166; MOLEFE 2019, 62). These collective resources are both the values, customs, rituals, and worldview shaping the communal life and the natural resources that nature provides for the wellbeing of all beings that participate in the relational webs of life.

The enduring nature of communion shapes the custodianship of humanity concerning the universe. Consequently, “The traditional African cosmology has the human being at the center of the universe; but it is a universe which has God as its Creative and Sustaining Force. The human being is at the center, but he or she is not the *master* of the universe” (EHUSANI 1991, 208). One cannot separate the human person from the universe just as one cannot separate oneself from the community and still live a holistic life. Consequently, “the African universe is one integral ‘whole’, and the African person [virtuous person] is addressed or treated as a ‘whole’” (1991, 220). Furthering the argument of integral and holistic existence, Nyang and Ehusani agree that “The African sees herself as a citizen of three different worlds at the same time: the world of concrete reality, the world of social values, and the world of ineffable self-consciousness” (1991, 88).

In contemporary times, more focus should be given to bearing witness not just to other humans but also to all of creation by Christians who take the call to discipleship seriously. The virtuous life is a life of responsibility. It is a responsibility that, when lived properly, leads to a world of harmony. This is at the core of an African perspective on a life of holiness. Christians cannot then see themselves as excused from making this world – this created gift from God – the abode of divine visitation. Any discussion on the virtuous life must recognize this fact. God, who became human and dwelt in our created world, has elevated both humanity and all of creation to a higher sphere - one worthy of preservation. Virtue is not antithetical to the created order. Rather, a life of virtue leads to harmony in the cosmos.

Society needs the virtuous person just as the virtuous person needs society. If this link between society and the virtuous life is to be appreciated, virtue ethicists ought to begin to take the communal nature of holiness seriously. Such notions of hermitic existence, which sometimes is understood as a negation of and withdrawal from the world, will need to be re-evaluated. If the virtuous life is seen as a withdrawal from the world, it goes against the essence of divine life. It goes against the gift of the Incarnation – God became human so that all humanity may become truly human in the true sense of the word – a humanity that is radically defined by communion.

Even in the context of sin, the enduring goodness in creation reflected in God's declaration endures. Why am I making this claim? If sin radically destroys the essential and relational goodness found in creation, then sin supersedes the

goodness that the proclamation of God brings about. However, one cannot deny that sin diminishes the sense of communion in human interactions. This diminishing is not equivalent to total deprivation as sometimes is argued in Christian thought. The virtuous life, aided by the grace of God, is focused on restoring and attaining harmony with God through the whole of creation. Furthermore, Christian notions of virtue ethics can benefit from African ethical thought, whose focus is “not so much on Original Sin and human depravity [but on] the wonder of life, and the love of God who gives this life to the family and the community” (1991, 220). The starting point for virtue ethics must not be sin. It should be love. Sin is the absence of harmony. Harmony is rooted in the goodness of God. Thus, the virtuous life ought to focus on the determination to participate in, preserve, attain, and bring to birth the enduring goodness of God upon which the harmony inherent in the virtuous life is hinged.

Conclusion

The virtuous life is not lived out at the expense of communion with others; rather, it is in communion with others that the virtuous life comes to be. In the words of J. A. Sofola “if he [an African] is rich, it is a collective richness and when and if the wealth is distributed and reaches everyone, leaving him no penny, all that he has left is collective poverty...For who will the African be who in the midst of riches could watch his extended family suffer want and deprivation and yet have peace of mind?” (1973, 86). This enduring and radical sense of communion is not a social contract. It is at the heart of who a person is. If this is brought to bear on issues of ecology, globalization, economics, racial equality, and international politics, there will be no room for exploitation of the other. Any form of exploitation of the other is an exploitation of the self. Why is this the case? It simply means that the self is always a self that is oriented towards the community. Finally, the holistic understanding of virtue must permeate human relationships with nature. Humans cannot be virtuous if they treat nature as a means to be exploited. If their desire for the good life has as its end the devastation of the cosmos, then they have failed in being custodians of creation.

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