SUMMER SCHOOL

An 'African' Perspective on Sustainable ICT: From Ethics to Policy

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Introduction

Environmental sustainability: a global and moral issue

The concern about the environment and environmental sustainability and our related ethical obligations are at the forefront of academic, political and societal debates today

It is both a global issue, as it transcends national interests and considerations, and a moral issue since it questions our normative theories towards the best way to address it

Introduction

The ICT paradoxical relation to environmental sustainability (Higon, Gholami, Shirazi, 2017)

On the one hand, ICT significantly contribute to the increase of pollution and hence to environmental un-sustainability through machinery production, energy consumption, recycling of electronic device, etc.

On the other hand, ICT can also become a game changer in term of reduction of pollution through smart transportation, smart city, energy saving gains, etc.

Introduction

Why protecting the environment matters?

Human rights

Future generations

Development

Intrinsic value of the environment

Introduction

Current way of tackling the issue

So far, we have relied on the dominant Western normative theories founded on rationalism and individualism to help address the issue at stake with little success

Introduction

What is needed

The current situation calls for a complete change in human behavior

Part of that change in behavior is the need to develop a spiritual shift, which is a sort of moral consciousness necessary to tackle the serious issue of environmental sustainability

That moral consciousness implies to rethink both our relation to the environment and the foundation of our ethical theories

Introduction

Why Ubuntu?

Unsustainability of the current situation

Global ecological awareness or consciousness calls for some sort of ethical pluralism in how we address the global issue is that this environmental crisis

Merits of the Ubuntu philosophy itself
- Ontological aspects : humanness and interconnectedness
- Ethical aspects: sharing (generosity) and caring(empathy)

Introduction

Three claims

1. The values of generosity and empathy that are entrenched into the 'Ubu-Ntu' worldview as opposed for instance to the vice of greed that descends from individualism rooted in the Western worldview could be the way forward for making the necessary spiritual shift in this digital era that will safeguard our environment which is part of that communal ethos.

2. We should identify our ICT needs in a way that distinguishes between subsistence and luxury pollution (Shue, 1993) in order to minimize their negative effects while maximizing their positives effects on the environment.

3. If we look at human beings as deeply linked to both the environment and community/society as Ubuntu claims, this should in a positive way reflect on and inform also our policies in at least three areas: a) the ownership of big tech companies, b) the access and control of data by citizens or c) technological inclusion.

Ubuntu Ethos

Ubuntu offers a moral framework that reflects histories and experiences from South African people

As such it is a more localized ethical framework even if there is some overlap with others African ethical frameworks

The ethical framework that Ubuntu and other African philosophers propose is intrinsically linked to their conception of personhood as relational instead of rational

Ubuntu Ethos

The question of who a person is and what it takes to become one has been central to the works of many African philosophers. Masolo (2010) sees the question of personhood as 'the pinnacle of African difference in philosophical theory' (p. 135).

Most African philosophers subscribe to a communal or more precisely a non-atomistic view of the human person. Mbiti states it very well (1990):

> "Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties. (…) The individual can only say: 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am'. This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man" (p. 106).

Ubuntu Ethos

Three key elements of an African conception of personhood can be drawn from Mbiti's account.

First, that persons are defined or define themselves in a relational context.

Secondly, that persons are communal in their beings.

Third, and perhaps less explicit, that personhood is tinged with normativity.

Ubuntu Ethos

'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am'

- An individual or a person exists as human only through others persons
- There is no humanity that can be independently construed; one's humanity is inextricably linked and bounded to others(' humanity)
- There is no personhood out of a community of other persons
  - There is a contrast with the cartesian (Western) notion of personhood that emphasized both the individual and his/her rationality

Ubuntu Ethos

Two conclusions on the metaphyisical or ontology aspects of Ubuntu:

1. Ubuntu ontology emphasizes RELATIONALITY instead of RATIONALITY
2. Ubuntu ontology is HOLISTIC AND COMMUNALISTIC instead of INDIVIDUALISTIC

Reality is seen here as a closed system where everything hangs together in such away that any change in the system affects the entire system

Ubuntu Ethos

From ontology to ethics : Normative implications of relational personhood

Ubuntu/African ethos is "built around an ontology that accept diversity or otherness without hierarchical judgments of human worth." Masolo (1994:10)

As a communalistic ontology, Ubuntu Ethics is communocentric: that is to say that all beings, i.e. earth, plants, animal and humans who are all part of what Tangwa calls the "African eco-bio-communitarian outlook," (Tangwa, 2004:100) are all part of the moral community

The notion that no human being exists in isolation of those other beings reflects on how moral values are portrayed

Since this ethics focuses on the interconnectedness among humans, **solidarity** and **the formation of human allegiances** become very significant to ethical conduct. The idea of the connectedness of persons also implies the interdependent development and fulfillment of the potential of both individuals and community (the community being extended here to all other beings).

Ubuntu Ethos

From ontology to ethics : Normative implications of relational personhood

Thus, the "I am what I am because of who we all are" simply expresses the idea that one's development and fulfillment are linked with those of others, and without the development and fulfillment of the community, ours would be non-existent. Thus, the essence of establishing humane relations with others means to see and think of ourselves through them and them through us, or simply when they become part of us and we part of them or when we consider the other as "us" or like us. Thus, humane relations, according to Ubuntu, simply imply embracing the values of **caring** and **sharing**. These are important values with regards to environmental sustainability (Etieyibo, 2017:638-639)

Ubuntu Ethos and Sustainability

How does the values of empathy (caring) and generosity (sharing) that flow from the relational personhood of ubuntu philosophy impacts our current environmental crisis?

Environmental sustainability refers to the preservation of natural resources as well as the ecosystem we all live in

The environment encompasses the entirety of beings, humans as well as non-humans

Environment sustainability, in trying to meet the needs of current and future generations, is mostly concerned with the interaction between human beings and the environment

Ubuntu WE should take environmental sustainability very seriously

Ubuntu Ethos and Sustainability

How does the values of empathy (caring) and generosity (sharing) that flow from the relational personhood of ubuntu philosophy impacts our current environmental crisis?

Environmental sustainability refers to the preservation of natural resources as well as the ecosystem we all live in

The environment encompasses the entirety of beings, humans as well as non-humans

Environment sustainability means that we should try to meet the needs of current and future generations in a way that does not compromise the health of the environment or the ecosystem that contribute to provide them at the first place. In this respect environment sustainability is mostly concerned with the interaction between human beings and the environment, and that interaction should not be one where the environment is only view on instrumental terms, but as a being in itself that needs to be respected as such to ensure an harmonious and peaceful interaction with others beings including humans

Ubuntu Ethos and Sustainability

How does the values of empathy (caring) and generosity (sharing) that flow from the relational personhood of ubuntu philosophy impacts our current environmental crisis?

The concern about environmental sustainability comes from the human ecological footprint that seems to exceed the planet regenerative capacity. There seems to be an overexploitation of those natural resources that lead tot the disequilibrium we experienced today

The Ubuntu ethics embraces certain attitudes or values like reconciliation, civility, civilized dialogue, solidarity, tolerance, mutual understanding, collaboration or shared concern in a context where public conversation about the environment are driven by competition, or confrontation

Ubuntu Ethos and Sustainability

The contribution of the Ubuntu ethos regarding environmental sustainability can be best assessed in two ways

One is its comparison to the Western dominant moral framework

- The reign of the individual and the cult of capitalism have led competition and confrontation to define human relations both among humans themselves and vis-à-vis the environment. Since self interest and greed have driven human activities, this has led to an overexploitation of the resources that the environment provide, provoking therefore the current environmental unsustainability we are all in

Ubuntu Ethos and Sustainability

Ubuntu versus Western moral frameworks

Lebow (1995:7) put its very well:

> Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfactions, our ego satisfactions, in consumption. The measure of social status, of social acceptance, of prestige, is now to be found in or consumptive patterns. The very meaning and signifcance of our lives today expressed in consumptive terms. We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced and discarded at an ever-increasing pace. We need to have people eat, drink, dress, ride, live, with ever more complicated and, therefore constantly more expensive consumption.

Hence, the dominant Western framework that promotes a consumerist version of capitalism where everything including is a commodity (including the environment) and is monetized can hardly address the environmental crisis at stake
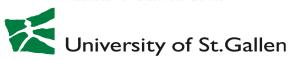
Ubuntu Ethos and Sustainability

Ubuntu versus Western moral frameworks

By promoting other values, taking the common good instead of the well-being of the individual as the starting point, one can expect Ubuntu to ensure a different outcome. Instead of the individualistic dominant culture where the competition leads individuals to improve their lives at the expense of others, Ubuntu suggests that the improvement of one's life can be done only by caring about those around them.

In this respect Ubuntu provides a moral framework

- that allows individuals to use the environment in a responsible, not an exploitative way – in a responsible way will mean here to make the normative distinction that Shue (1993) does between Subsistence pollution that is the consequences of what we need to live a decent and dignified life and Luxury pollution which is the consequence of an essentially exploitative relation to the environment
- That requires individuals to always take into account other individuals when they do use the environment
- That commend individual to seek common ground, to collaborate when seeking to find solutions that ensure that the environment is used in a way that benefits all

Ubuntu Ethos, Environmental Sustainability and ICT

How does technology and especially ICT fits in the general debate about environmental sustainability in the Ubuntu framework?

On the relationship between technology and the environment, Mazisi Kunene (1982. 235) writes:

> a highly ethically advanced society need not necessarily be technologically advanced; equally a technologically advanced society does not automatically possess a high ethical level. Indeed more often than not technological advancement tends to barbarize society, since by its very nature it implies a high degree of competitiveness for resources. In short, the instruments or tools for modelling man's material environment do not necessarily improve the ethical quality of society.

Sabelo Mhlabi (2020: 24)echoes this by affirming that:

> The efficiency and optimization that technology can promote is not necessarily morally sound or fit for a society

Ubuntu Ethos, Environmental Sustainability and ICT

How does technology and especially ICT fits in the general debate about environmental sustainability in the Ubuntu framework?

Thus, the current un-sustainable situation regarding the environment that stems from the incessant quest for technological improvement is also in part the consequence of an essentially individualistic way of understanding personhood as rational which leads to greed, consumerism and sometimes materialism

IN this way, technology and ICT can lead to a sort of spiritual dislocation or decline that non only disconnect us from one another, but also takes us away from valuing deep human relationships

As a social ethics too, Ubuntu can inspire us to see and use technology and ICT in a way that is responsible by avoiding luxury pollution and not exploitative by sticking to the subsistence pollution

Ubuntu Ethos, Environmental Sustainability and ICT

How does technology and especially ICT fits in the general debate about environmental sustainability in the Ubuntu framework?

ICT and Technology can become more part of the solution and less part of the problem of environmental sustainability
- if the social and communal interpretation of personhood and the values of generosity and compassion that flow from it are the point of departure,
- if there is a shift from the rational to the relational interpretation of personhood,
- if the dignity of the individual lies less on his or her capacity for autonomy and rationality and more on his or her singular place within a whole, his or her role being to strengthen that whole a community for all within it to thrive

Some policy implications

How do we transalte into policy the spiritual shift that Ubuntu calls for regarding technology and ICT?

There are at least three interesting areas:

a) The ownership of big tech companies: If big tech companies are only in the hands of powerful capitalists, it would be hard to reverse the consumerism culture that leads to overconsumption at the first place. The Ubuntu Ethos will encourage some sort of reform where there is some sort co-ownership of big tech that ensure that the common good and the well-being of all are what guides the environmental related decision of those companies, the most impactful of our times

Some policy implications

How do we transalte into policy the spiritual shift that Ubuntu calls for regarding technology and ICT?

b) Another area is the access and control of data by citizens. As an ethics that promote solidarity, Ubuntu can lead to policies that push technology to contribute social and economic solidarity among the members of a given political community by easing the control and access that these members have over their data

c) Finally, technological inclusion is an area where the Ubuntu Ethics, given its emphasis on solidarity, equity, community and so on, can inspire some policies that will foster social inclusion. In this area, tech companies can play a more fundamental role in promoting equality in the way they design their product and make them accessible to all.

THANK YOU