

An African view on global business ethics: *Ubuntu* – A social contract interpretation

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Key Words

Ubuntu, ISCT (Integrated Social Contract Theory), macro- and microsocial contract, communitarian, relativism, universalism

Abstract

In recent years there has been growing interest in the African philosophy of Ubuntu and several authors suggested theoretical ways in which it could be applied in the field of business management using the ideas of Lovemore Mbigi as an important advocate of the Ubuntu style of participatory management. This paper tries to show that Ubuntu, as a communitarian philosophy, can provide a particular approach to global business ethics when its philosophy is interpreted with the categories of business ethics as proposed by the Integrated Social Contract Theory (ISCT), c.f. Donaldson/Dunfee. The paper clarifies what is meant by Ubuntu and in which way Ubuntu values are particular for Africa, and universal at the same time. It also shows that the ethical content of Ubuntu concepts, which incorporate values of social justice, righteousness, care, empathy and respect for others, reciprocity, dignity and harmony, is understood as the expression of collective in contrast to individual consciousness. These values can only be transferred into society if the actors (e.g. stakeholders, trade unions, but also government and civil society organizations) in the community share responsibilities. The responsibilities between the actors can be part of the contents of a micro-social contract in the sense of a contractarian approach. To promote the goods of a community is to promote the goods of all its members. Conceiving a corporation as a community differs from Western practices, but gets a specific meaning in an intercultural context. The last section of this paper explains one way in which Ubuntu might be fruitfully applied as an anti-corruption strategy when the conditions of a micro-social contract are fulfilled.
