

MARTIN  
ODEI AJEI

# Reporting on African Responses to COVID-19: African Philosophical Perspectives for Addressing Quandaries in the Global Justice Debate

**Abstract:** The first case of COVID-19 infection in Africa was recorded in Egypt on 14 February 2020. Following this, several projections of the possible devastating effect that the virus can have on the population of African countries were made in the Western media. This paper presents evidence for Africa's successful responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and under-reporting or misrepresentation of these successes in Western media. It proceeds to argue for accounting for these successes in terms of Africa's communitarian way of life and conceptions of self, duty, and rights; and that a particular orientation in theorizing on global justice can highlight the injustices inherent in the misrepresentation of these successes and contribute shared perspectives to formulating a framework of values and concepts that would facilitate the implementation of global policy goals for justice. The paper is thus grounded in a rejection of the insular tenets of theorizing prevalent in the global justice debate and to persistent inclinations in Western scholarship to the thinking that theorizing in the African context that draws inspiration from the cultural past has little to contribute to the quest for justice globally. On the contrary, it argues that reflexive critique of cultural history is a necessary source of normative ideals that can foster tolerant coexistence and a cooperative endeavour toward shared conceptions of justice in the contemporary world.

**Keywords:** *African philosophy; normative values; COVID-19; Global justice; public policy*

## **Introduction: what's going on?**

Liberalism in one form or another predominates in contemporary political philosophy, and John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (TJ) (Rawls, 1971) is seminal in this philosophical tradition. There is also substantial convergence on the view that global justice, as an orientation in contemporary political philosophy, owes its existence to efforts to extend beyond an individual state Rawls' two theories of justice in TJ. The convergence stretches to a belief by global justice theorists that their debate continues to centre on their initial concern with addressing the injustice of global inequalities (Flikschuh, 2017). Since the first case of coronavirus infection was confirmed in Egypt on February 14 2020,

fearful projections of fatalities from the disease in Africa have filled the news media. Bill Gates has warned that the virus could claim 10 million African lives (Financial times, 2020), and his wife in an interview with CNN's Poppy Harlow projected the spectre of African streets strewn with COVID-19 dead (CNN Business, 2020). A report by the UN's Economic Commission for Africa projected 3.3 million deaths on the continent, in the worst-case scenario in which governments do not intervene with adequate preventative measures; and the loss of 300,000 lives in a best case (UNECA, 2020). In projecting these grim outlooks, the Commission referred to a model composed by researchers at Imperial College London. A less apocalyptic picture was presented by a model by the World Health Organization's (WHO) regional office for Africa, published in the BMJ Global Health (Cabore et al., 2020). However, Africa has so far evaded the brunt of the virus better than Western Europe and the US have done.

Between 1st March and 27th November, 2020, the 10 countries in the Europe and North America who were worst hit by COVID-19 recorded 24,093,757 infections and 500,508 deaths from the disease. Disaggregation of these figures by country is: USA (infections 12,883,846 and deaths 263,455); Russia (infections 2,196,691 and deaths 38,175); the UK (infections 1,578,429 and deaths 57,128); Spain (infections 1,617,355 and deaths 44,374); Italy (infections 1,509,875 and deaths 52,850); Germany (infections 1,017,830 and deaths 15,640); France (infections 2,235,537 and deaths 51,041); Canada (infections 356,650 and deaths 11,818); Belgium (infections 567,532 and deaths 16,219); and Belarus (infections 130,012 and deaths 1,218) (CSSE, 2020). Conversely, during the same period, the 10 worst hit countries in Africa recorded 1,509,084 infections and 31,331 deaths. A disaggregation of these figures is: South Africa (infections 778,571 and deaths 21,289); Egypt (infections 114,475 and deaths 6,596); Nigeria (infections 66,974 and deaths 1,169); Ghana (infections 51,225 and deaths 323); Algeria (infections 79,110 and deaths 2,352); Cameroon (infections 24,022 and deaths 437); Morocco (infections 340,684 and deaths 5,619); Sudan (infections 16,864 and deaths 1,215); Senegal (infections 15,960 and deaths 331); and Ivory Coast (infections 21,199 and deaths 131) (CSSE, 2020).

But evidence of Western media coverage of responses to COVID-19 between March and mid-November 2020 misrepresents the success of African approaches to the pandemic, and this misrepresentation should arouse the interest of global justice theorists. This is because the misreporting of African efforts is morally relevant, as it provides focus and grounds for the moral evaluation of African governments. Additionally, the slanted reportage is indicative of an implicit perspective on the source and object of moral value. Thus, the reportage is a pertinent theme for the global

justice debate, as a field of intellectual activity whose concerns have been projected to be 'here to stay' (Scheffler, 2014) to contribute to a just world. African countries took decisive and noticeably different measures from Western approaches to curb the spread of the virus. My paper proposes that the cogency of the African responses and their successful implementation can be explained in terms of normative values embedded in culture; primarily in terms of Africa's communitarian way of life, which conditions people's conceptions of themselves as essentially communal beings and their perception of the duties that attend to that. I claim that the media's resistance of accurate reporting cannot be rendered as an unintentional misreading of these African actions and the reasons underlying their success. To assess the difficulties that such intentional under-reporting of African success poses for realizing global justice theory, I believe Arjun Appadurai's work on the mechanisms through which the interactive system of global culture flow is helpful (Appadurai, 2015).

### **Balm for healing the world from the scar on the conscience of the world?**

Appadurai unveils five dimensions to the flow and overlaps in global culture –ethnoscape, mediascape, finanscape, ideoscape, and technoscape (ibid.: 97). Appadurai states that these constitute the 'building blocks' of the 'multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe' (ibid.: 97). *Mediascapes* refers to configurations of the production and dissemination of information by private and public interests throughout the world, and the images of the world created by these media ; by *ethnoscape*, Appadurai means the landscape of persons who constitute [an essential feature] of the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups, and therefore affect the politics of (and between) nations (ibid.). A significant feature of the connection between *mediascapes* and *technoscapes* is that the lines between the realistic and the fictional landscapes are blurred so that the farther away audiences are from the experiences of the creators and interests of *mediascapes*, the more likely it is for creators to use criteria of their perspective 'to construct imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic' for their audiences (ibid.: 99). In addition to Appadurai's list, Yuk Wah Chan and David Haines have recently added *diseasescape*, a harmful feature of global culture exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has 'turned all [national] borders into portals of danger' that human beings are ill-equipped to fight (Chan and Haines, 2020).

Misrepresentation of African culture and agency in Western scholarship and other forms of knowledge production pervades the sediments of hundreds of years of history, but not much of this has been uncovered and theorized by African

philosophers. It is worth noting, however, that the flows among Appadurai's five 'scapes', especially those between *ethnoscape*, *mediascape*, *financescape*, can be considered a contemporary expression of Olufemi Taiwo's thesis on modes of knowledge production. According to Taiwo, knowledge production in the West proceeds in part by failing to acknowledge other centres of like activity to enable the West's ascendancy in production to eventually dominate and suppress other forms of knowledge production (Taiwo, 1993). What's interesting about Taiwo's thesis is the idea of knowledge production: it is not as though we discover what knowledge is. Rather, we produce knowledge. And producing knowledge is thus an economic process in which self-interested politics and power are deeply involved.

Therefore, if success in Africa is not in the interest of dominant *mediascape* power to report, the likelihood of silence on this success or distortion of it increases. The following section assesses how *diseasescape* and *mediascape* have intersected since the beginning of March 2020, and the implications this has for the future and practical significance of global justice theory.

### **No one-size-fits-all**

On March 30, 2020, the government of Ghana imposed a lockdown on Accra, the country's capital city and Kumasi, the second-largest city. In his speech on 19th April that announced the lifting of the lockdown restrictions, President Akufo-Addo reasoned that 'Lifting these restrictions doesn't mean we are letting our guard down [...] We will tailor our solutions to our unique social, economic and cultural conditions. There is no one-size-fits-all approach' (Akufo-Addo, 2020). There is no universal approach to ensure simultaneous safeguarding of the lives of people and keeping the nation's economy going.

Akufo-Addo's decision to pursue contextually-based solutions to secure the health and coffers of citizens has proven to dash the fears of scientists who feared such measures would quicken the spread of the virus. Although this point of caution is worth noting, it is likewise worth noting the opinion of other scientists that distinctive factors may account for why the virus might be less deadly in Africa. Firstly, droplet-spread diseases, such as flu, have tended to spread more slowly on the continent: only one severe case of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) was recorded during the 2002-2003 outbreak. Paul Hunter reasons that such low uptake of airborne infections might be attributable to the effect of ultraviolet light or a climate that meant people spend more time outside, among others (Hunter, 2020). Further, old age is a key feature of the known fatalities of COVID-19 and Africa's youthful population may also help to explain the low death rate so far: the median age in Africa is 19.4 years,

compared with 40 in Europe and 38 in the US. Just 1-2% of the population is aged 70 or more, whereas on other continents the elderly account for a much larger share, rising as high as 22% in Japan (Hunter, 2020).

A clear contrast can be drawn between approaches pursued by African and Western governments to stem the spread of the virus, and it would be rather uncharitable to consider these approaches to have been determined by the factors listed in the previous paragraph without considering the implications of the communal way of life alluded to in the introduction and its attendant values. Thus, much of the discussion in this section and subsequent ones would designate a contrast between these communal values and liberal values. As of the 10th of June 2020, no country in sub-Saharan Africa except for South Africa has imposed a complete nationwide lockdown. I have no doubt whatsoever that an inescapable reason for this is the greater fear which the majority of Africans have of ‘the hunger virus than [they have] of COVID-19’ (Reportghana, 2020). The first case was confirmed in Ghana on 12th March 2020, and on 22nd March the country’s borders were shut to travellers. The only exception to in-bound travel was for Ghanaians who, upon arrival, were forcibly quarantined for two weeks. By this date, in Ghana, 24 cases and one death had been confirmed (Ghana Health Service, 2020). Comparatively, at the beginning of March, the UK had fewer than 200 confirmed cases, but when it went into lockdown on 23rd March it had recorded 6,650 confirmed cases and 335 deaths (The Guardian, 2020), and by the 27th of November it had confirmed 1,578,429 cases and 57,128 deaths (CSSE, 2020).<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, since mid-March, Ghana has pursued an extensive system of contact tracing of persons infected by the virus and to determine where those persons had been recently. This was proceeded by utilizing a large number of community health workers and volunteers, and ‘pool testing,’ a technique by which multiple bio-samples are tested and then followed up as individual tests only if a positive result is found (Hirsch, 2021). Ghana launched the COVID-19 Tracker App on 15th April 2020, and assurances from the developer of the application that they wouldn’t wrongly use people’s data sufficed to assuage the concerns of Ghanaians (ITU News, 2020). This contrasts with the UK’s imprecise policy on tracking people who had contact with people infected with the virus, as of 13th June 2020. An article that appeared in The Telegraph on this date reports misgivings by privacy experts in the UK that the NHS’s contact tracing App which is at the centre of the government’s lockdown exit

<sup>1</sup> In this reportage, a taxi driver whose vehicle was impounded by security officials in Abuja, Nigeria, because he had violated the directives on a national lockdown, stripped naked to express his grievances with the act. He said it was hunger that pushed him to violate the lockdown order, and that the “hunger virus” is much deadlier than “Coronavirus” (Reportghana, 2020).

strategy and which is currently being tested on the Isle of Wight with plans for the full UK roll-out in June, could collect sensitive information, and that patient confidentiality risked being compromised if it were to be deployed. The Guardian carried stories of such misgivings about the App's infringement on privacy in its edition of 5th of May 2020 (Sabbagh D, Hern A, and Protor K (2020)).

In Ghana and several African countries, contact with an infected person is sufficient reason for being forcibly quarantined. One is not asked to go into self-imposed isolation, as is the case in the UK, to 'protect lives and save the NHS'. In a study conducted a few months before the lockdown, 75% of Ghanaians said the government should be able to curtail people's movement in the face of threats to public safety and security - in a country where the majority of citizens do not own refrigerators to store food, and where 30% of citizens have running water inside their homes and 46% lack toilet facilities in their homes (Armah-Attoh et al., 2020). Further, there were no economic incentives provided to private-sector workers and entrepreneurs, for the loss of income from the lockdown - in a country where 70% experience 'high lived poverty' defined as going without cash income for some period in the preceding year (ibid.: 3).

It is apposite now to ask two questions that have implications for the global justice debate: the first is Afua Hirsch's question - why has the Western media been silent on reporting Africa's coronavirus successes? Secondly, we may ask: are there factors in the African environment beyond the empirical - biological and environmental, like climate and population structure - that enabled citizens to accept these policies pursued by governments without uproar? I begin with the second question by reiterating my belief, stated in the introduction, that the self-conception of most Africans as essentially communal beings and the duties that correlate with such self-awareness are among such factors.

Take the case of Africa's forcible isolation on suspicion of contact with an infected person. The key word in addressing such situations in the West has been self-isolation, which means it is the decision of the self to isolate itself. Such a policy of self-isolation concurs with laws governing civil liberties, which would prohibit the police or any government agent to come into a person's house to take her to be locked up somewhere against her will when she's not infected. When the police come knocking on such a person's door, she can tell them: 'go away! I'm staying at my house. I'm not at risk of affecting anybody.' But in Africa, the option of self-choice is withdrawn. The government isolates you, and as the study in Ghana shows, people accept this policy without rancour.

The African's decision to accept forcible quarantine even where there is no evidence of infection stems from a point of view that it does not constitute an

instance of infringement on her freedom of movement. There is an alternative value at work other than ideals of individual liberties, and this value stems from her understanding that she is a communal being whose mode of existence is fundamentally relational.

This understanding dictates that what is of intrinsic moral value in the situation is primarily not the self-interested determinations of the conscience of a rational moral agent, but something else.

The point under consideration is not that in the communal model the individual's ethical agency is irrelevant. Nor is it that sanctions against compliance with restrictive measures such as an obligation to wear face coverings or mandatory quarantine have no role to play in the behaviour of Ghanaians and citizens of several other African countries. The point is rather that despite their understanding that the imposition of a mandatory quarantine restricts one's right to freedom of movement, people did not consider these as unbearable infringements, but rather assumed the willing to concede the right to such freedoms in order to pursue what they conceive to be a greater duty of a communal subject in a situation like this – to contribute to securing public health and safety. Thus, although the individual's ethical agency is always relevant, she is encouraged to acknowledge that she can fall in error in her decision-making, and that if this happens the outcome could have further-reaching consequences than her own disadvantage, which a sensitive communal being should seek to avoid.

An ontologically relational being is normatively attuned to promoting human and community welfare. So, if the exercise of your freedom is likely to result in a health threat to the population, which means harming communal good, the community is entitled to point out to you that your conduct implies you are going against your own - communal - nature, and intervene. One's subscription to progressive communal values more than individual freedoms constitutes the distinguishing feature of what makes her a being with intrinsic moral value, and the foundation of her ethical choices. Accordingly, she considers her liberties as insufficiently important to make her individuality the final instance of moral agency. This enables her to see the limitation on her freedom of movement as important for protecting not only other people's right to life but also her own life, as her duties as a person include acting morally to ensure that other people escape being infected if per chance, she is infected. Standard individualist morality of the universalist kind, exemplified by the libertarian residue in liberal thinking, would reject this African sacrifice of individual freedom to uphold community good. But the communal moral context proceeds from other

assumptions than liberal ones, which work for the context and should therefore be of interest to anyone interested in reducing global injustice.

The merits of communal morality can also be illustrated by means of the success and acceptance of the aggressive contact tracking and tracing methods adopted by Ghana's government. The reasons given above for compelled quarantine in the communalist setting applies to this subject matter as well. But beyond placing less emphasis on the right to be left alone, privacy occurs less and has less practical value in the communal environment. In a standard 'compound house' in Ghana, a good deal of data on one's life experiences is exposed to public view, and intentionally sharing of personal information on one's life is accepted to a large degree. Limited privacy is intuitively allowed under a tacit system of reciprocal access to information on community members. Such effortless access to willingly shared information is important for balanced management of a social organization and serves to restrain monopoly on confidential information. These communal arrangements are undergirded by trust, that people who know your weaknesses would not use them unfairly against you, and the in-built checks and balances stemming from mutually available information secures this trust. In contrast to this, where civil liberties are assigned overriding value in social relations and citizens shelter under the umbrella of these liberties to resist sharing information on their lives, considerable room opens in public reason to tolerate the surreptitious collection of such 'private' information by the intelligence agencies of the state.

Thus, African communal life renders shared knowledge and privileged information on others acceptable. One reason for this could be the prevalence of the belief that the lives of relational beings imply a great deal of shared familiarity because of their reciprocal dependence on each other. It is my responsibility to know as much about you as is possible, to be able to assess how much I can count on you to contribute to communal advancement. This serves the purpose for me and other community members to assess your abilities and needs, and be able to have good reason to define our relationship. Much of your life, then, is not the property of an atomistic unit upon which another person intrudes, but something about a person with whom other lives are shared commonly. Similarly, to the case of civil liberties, life under this communitarian model may be contrasted with what pertains in the UK, where there is agitation for the NHS's software application for contact tracing to be made conditional on voluntary consent to avoid users' concerns over privacy invasion.

However, these measures were also adopted in South Africa, where recorded cases and deaths are comparable to cases in some European and Asian countries.

It could be argued therefore that the low cases in Ghana cannot be attributed to these governments' interventions per se – for if that were the case then we would have seen similar successes in South Africa and the other places on and outside the continent of Africa where such measures were also implemented. The absence of such successes in these other places, it may be argued, casts doubt on the cogency of my argument, for its cogency requires claiming that these measures were successful in Ghana and the cited African countries alone. But this objection is without warrant, as it can be as little established that the measures implemented in Ghana are not responsible in any way for the country's success in containing the spread of the virus as it can be shown that they weren't. The lack of success in other places where similar interventions were implemented is inconclusive evidence that those measures cannot be successful in the African countries cited. This is because there are subtle differences in Africa in spite of the substantial common features that these countries share. These differences condition the citizen's responses or attitudes towards these measures. And these attitudes can be explained in terms of the normative values that are prevalent in their cultures, and which they embrace. The attitudes are contingent on values, which I hold therefore account fundamentally for achieving the results that have been witnessed in Ghana and other parts of Africa.

In their fight against this virus, Western governments' insistence on 'being led by science' has become a mantra. It is worth mentioning that African countries have pursued the solutions of science without claiming it to be the touchstone of a remedy. The University of Ghana announced on 11th April 2020 successful sequencing by its scientists of genomes of SARS-CoV-2, to obtain information about the genetic composition of viral strains in 15 of the confirmed cases in Ghana for clinical management of infections. Data from the sequencing has been shared with scientists worldwide on the Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data (GISAID) platform (University of Ghana News Release, 2020). Also, Senegal, whose planning for COVID-19 response began in January 2020, has begun trials for a COVID-19 testing kit that would have a unit cost of 1 US dollar, and which is expected to detect both current or previous infection via antigens in saliva, or antibodies in less than 10 minutes (Aljazeera News, 2020; Hirsch, 2020). However, the persistent exhibition of medical-scientific data to justify government policy in the West seems calculated to inspire belief in the ordinary person in the rationality of following 'the science.' Nevertheless, these invocations of the preeminence of science could never maintain their integrity in the absence of appeals to normative values. The mantra of science has been constantly tempered with communalist values like 'saving the vulnerable in community' and 'protect our NHS, protect our community.' It

remains to be seen whether these invocations, unfamiliar as they are to the standard Western normative framework steeped in individual liberties, prove to be ad-hoc resources in an emergency, or whether they will endure to affect the structure of prevailing standards of liberal morality in the long run. Akuffo-Addo and other African leaders' refusal to accept a 'one-size-fits-all' solution to a common problem, and to chart context-guided responses to the problem, is reasonable and has been proven justified by its successes. This means, then, that the policies implemented in the West would have resonated less in African moral sensibilities, and therefore would have been less successful. If so, then Afua Hirsch's question has implications for the global justice debate: why are Africa's approaches to the coronavirus, reasonable and successful as they are, being overlooked by the Western media to the glare of global justice theorists?

### **Balm for healing the world from the scar on the conscience of the world?**

Unjust representations of Africa in intellectual and popular media have endured for centuries. Portrayed images of barbaric and pre-logical cultures justified slavery and European colonization of the continent. In the post-colony, these images effortlessly mutated into poverty-stricken and socially unstable polities in the hands of hopelessly corrupt political elites that hurtle, unrestrained, toward failed/fragile statehood (Meredith, 2005). This imagery is calculated to showcase Africa as the unlucky continent - the 'scar on the conscience of the West' (The Guardian, 2001). It is difficult to discard the thought that the current convergence of mediascape on diseasescape through the misreporting of African COVID-19 successes is configured to amplify this perception of Africa as the unlucky continent in Western imagination.

Is the spectre of African streets strewn with COVID-19 dead, as feared by the Gates', or the status of Africa in Blair's imagination, justified? One can grant that Blair and the Gates' were not making completely baseless pronouncements. The threat of COVID-19 to feeble African health care systems merits concern; and Blair's perception of a glaring paradox in Africa likewise is worth some sympathy: the continent has received over a trillion dollars in aid since independence, yet it is the only one in which the proportion of poor inhabitants has steadily grown over the same period. In spite of these, however, the fact that one of the most informed couples on African healthcare management and generous private contributors to African healthcare funding in the world; and a Prime Minister who had aspirations for establishing and leading an Institute for Global Change, could only envisage the outcome they did, is a troubling feeder into the average rational Westerner's mindset on how an unlucky and inept Africa can achieve

equally praiseworthy outcomes as its scientifically adept benefactors. It is in the interest of mediascape and its economic interests to preserve a narrative that has maintained a stable perception in the minds of ordinary rational persons in the West, and so any fact that defies this perception is best explained away. In this case, the low cases of reported cases on the continent is attributed to the absence of adequate test kits and therefore to low levels of testing.

But machinations of *mediascape* presumably do more to Western imagination than disparage the accomplishments of African culture: By deemphasizing the importance of non-Western norms and the values, they deprive Western life of the possibility of perceiving what good it may derive from these normative elements of non-Western culture. Derek Thompson's article on South Korea's success at curbing the first wave of the virus in *The Atlantic* on May 6, makes this point succinctly. It claims:

‘Juxtaposing the South Korean response with the American tragedy, some commentators have chalked up the difference to an ancient culture of docile collectivism and Confucianism across the Pacific. This observation isn't just racist. It also exoticizes South Korea's success and makes it seem like the inevitable result of millennia of cultural accretion, rather than something the U.S., or any other country, can learn from right now. The truth is that the Korean government and its citizens did something simple, admirable, and all too rare: They suffered from history, and they learned from it’ (Thompson, 2020: 2).

The history Thompson refers to is South Korea's course of actions in dealing with the SARS outbreak in 2002, the H1N1 influenza in 2009, and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, or MERS in 2015. The thought here seems to be that these historical circumstances have contrived to produce a culturally distinctive consciousness of self and agency - modes of responding to crises – that arguably underlie the Korean success; and that such acknowledgement of alternative moral traditions could be useful to Western efforts to curb the virus. Such acknowledgement is desirable precisely because a serious conception of global justice in the liberal tradition implies acknowledging the reasonableness of the moral orientations of other societies.

### **Global justice and the fork of liberalism**

Recent liberal discussion on global justice makes available two options for addressing the extent to which liberal requirements of justice can guide efforts to mitigate global inequalities. Several theorists assert the capability of liberalism to provide a set of substantive norms that can be universally applied to achieve justice globally. Beitz, Buchanan, Nagel and Pogge may be counted amongst these universalizing liberal theorists. Beitz stresses the normativity of human

rights as a substantive concept of justice capable achieving of international acceptance (Beitz, 2005) and considers it an 'important objective of global political life' (ibid.: 11). Some of Pogge's principal arguments for universalizing liberal political and moral theory appear in *Realizing Rawls*. Here, he reasons that persons in consensus on a moral value-based institutional scheme that he calls 'international pluralism,' is achievable by 'knowledgeable and intelligent persons of goodwill' who inhabit different forms of social organizations around the globe (Pogge, 1989: 230). This will be a consensus on 'value clusters' such as the liberal system of equal liberties and satisfaction of basic human needs implied in Rawls' two conceptions of justice (ibid.: 231). Nagel, likewise, thinks that human rights provide a moral context for political justice. He reasons that the interests protected by the normative force of human rights requirements 'are so fundamental, and the burdens they impose, considered statistically, so much slighter, that a criterion of universalizability of the Kantian type clearly supports them' (Nagel, 2005: 131). We need only to be capable of 'putting ourselves in other people's shoes' to comprehend how human rights must be a 'moral minimum' that imposes a duty that governs the relations of all persons in the world (ibid.: 131). And what predominantly does this minimal moral work is civil and political rights: It is these kinds of rights that set universal and pre-political limits to the legitimate use of power, across all forms of political association (ibid.).

This universalist strain in global justice is so strong, that it brooks no deviation in the minds of some theorists. Buchanan asserts categorically that Rawls's Law of Peoples betrays liberalism because it accords legitimacy to inegalitarian regimes. This is because Rawls' proposal that the parties who will formulate the eight principles that constitute the basic charter of the Society of Peoples represent peoples, but not individuals (Rawls, 1993). This is problematic for multiple reasons. First, it offends against the premise of social contract theory, which most liberals accept, that reasonable moral facts or principles are those that individuals agree upon in some commonly accepted deliberative procedure, through careful consideration of their interests. Secondly, assigning agency for the formulation of normative principles to peoples rather than persons offends against fundamental principles of international (human rights) law as it makes for disregarding the interests of dissident individuals or minorities (Buchanan, 2000: 698).

Indeed, Rawls evolved a more modest view of the contribution of liberalism to addressing global injustice than those outlined in the previous paragraph. Rawls reasoned that liberals have to learn to assign the status reasonableness to the values of non-liberal but decent societies; and that this places an obligation

on liberals to accept that there are differences between different value schemes. Although Rawls was primarily concerned in *A Theory of Justice* (TJ) with distributive justice within countries, flickers of this call to liberals to moderate their belief in the universal reach of their theories appear in TJ. Arguably, it is these flickers that set the global justice debate going. Rawls asserts in TJ that natural duties, the grounds of which inhere in just social institutions, are owed to persons generally (Rawls, 1971). It is in pursuit of the natural duty of justice that Rawls suggests a forum where representatives of peoples would deliberate on moral choices to arrive at the eight principles of justice for a Society of Peoples where liberal democratic society and well-ordered non-liberal forms of political society that seek ‘proper self-respect of themselves as a people, resting on their common awareness of their trials during their history and of their culture with its accomplishments’ (Rawls, 1999: 34) become ‘equal participating members in good standing’ (ibid.: 59, 37).

Rawls’ *Political Liberalism* offers insights into his call for liberal toleration in a pluralistic moral context. This work is thus an important prelude to his position in *Law of Peoples*. In *Political Liberalism* Rawls holds that the stability of a society of people characterized by disparate religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines, necessitates a basic structure for a political conception of justice, that also serves to focus an ‘overlapping consensus’ of the reasonable comprehensive doctrines affirmed by its citizens (Rawls 1993: 133-172). A political conception of justice is characterized by three features: First, it is a moral conception designed for the basic structure of social institutions; second, it is a freestanding doctrine that is consistent with and can be supported by various reasonable comprehensive doctrines that endure in the society (ibid.); and finally, the content of a political conception of justice includes fundamental ideas considered ‘implicit in the public political culture of a democratic society’ (ibid.: 15). What this means is that various prevailing value preferences in the society can be accommodated by widely accepted foundational beliefs and values grounded in a society’s history, customs, practices and institutions.

These endemic cultural goods, each from its own point of view are what provide reasons to sustain overlapping consensus (ibid.: 16). What matters is that ‘citizens themselves, within the exercise of their liberty of thought and conscience, and looking to their comprehensive doctrines, view the political conception as derived from, or congruent with, or at least not in conflict with, their other values’ (ibid.: 11).

As indicated above, *The Law of Peoples* conceives of an international Society of Peoples composed of liberal and non-liberal societies of equal moral and

political standing (Rawls, 1999: 59, 37). A unit of social organization is 'well-ordered' if its members exhibit the following features: they subscribe to a common set of political and social values (ibid.: 24); derive pride of their identity from the accomplishments of their history and culture (ibid.: 34); share a bond of 'common sympathies' that make them cooperate with each other more willingly than with other people (ibid.: 23-24); they have 'a moral nature', which guides them to make choices in accordance with 'considerations of reasonableness embedded in their public political culture' (Beitz, 2000: 679). Rawls' stance on the reasonableness of the values of well-ordered societies is clarified further in an essay that appeared a year after the *Law of Peoples*. Here, he amplifies the claim that a conception of a person and the relation of persons to society implicitly affirmed by a culture is essential to the construction of a moral theory meant for application in that culture. In constructing such theory, 'the leading idea is to establish a suitable connection between a particular conception of the person and [the] first principles' of the theory (Rawls, 1980: 516). Accordingly, in justifying such theory, one must be able to derive principles that can be justified to all citizens, because they are reasonable to them by virtue of 'how they conceive of their persons and construe the general features of social cooperation among persons so regarded' (ibid.: 517). Hence, in his construction of justice as fairness, he was 'not trying to find a conception of justice suitable for all societies regardless of their particular social or historical circumstances,' but rather to articulate and make explicit shared values and principles which, for hundreds of years in the political history of Western Europe and America, have been 'latent in a common sense' or congenial to the most essential convictions and traditions of that history (ibid.: 518). These works, stretching for four decades, sufficiently illustrate Rawls' position that a liberal's accepting of a reasonable view that departs from liberal values does not amount to a betrayal of liberalism.

In looking for a basis for judging the success of African countries in dealing with the pandemic so far, one can either endorse the liberal global theorists of non-Rawlsian persuasion, for whom liberal values prominently exemplified by individual rights are supreme and universalizable and for whom violation or restriction of such rights indicate moral failure. Arguably, *mediascape* has chosen this path. In my view, this option has inherent limitations that make a coherent vision of global obligations of justice difficult to formulate, as these obligations can hardly be conceived and justified by a sole value system. Alternatively, one can accept Rawls' idea of reasonable contextually derived values and acknowledge that Africa's approach is different but reasonable because it appeals to values that are deep-seated in the community. The grounds

of African agency in stemming the tide of COVID-19 infections may not work everywhere, but it has worked so far in a context where a premium is placed on duty to the community. In my view, global justice theorists are ill-advised to adopt the path followed by *mediascape*, for the concerns stated at the genesis of their debate tilts toward the Rawlsian point of view and its prospects for ensuring the debate is ‘here to stay.’

### **Let’s get it on African philosophical perspectives and global normative theorizing**

Despite Sheffler’s optimism, the longevity and practical value of global justice debate will undoubtedly depend on how seriously it incorporates multiple intellectual perspectives into pondering the conditions for reducing global inequality. Recent African philosophical work, although not dismissive of Scheffler’s optimism about the future of the debate, posits the need to reassess its assumptions. Menkiti is emphatic on the need to deploy African thought in ‘ordering perspectives’ on approaches to the problems of justice (Menkiti, 2017: 23), and in Okeja’s view, the future of the debate will remain vulnerable until theorists place at the centre of their concerns the normative resources of ‘the agents who bear the brunt of the impacts of the unequal and unjust world at the centre of global justice discourse’ (Uchenna, 2017: 4). In this context, Okeja notes the corrosive effects of the ‘parochial universalism’ of global justice theorizing noted in the previous section and its lack of engagement with African philosophy on global inequality (*ibid.*: 2). Likewise, Flikschuh sees the two philosophical discourses as essentially separate and non-intersecting (Flikschuh, 2017a), and agrees with Menkiti and Okeja in her observation that a truly global discourse on justice must invite reflective awareness against ‘mistaking unavoidable perspectivalism for an assuredly universal viewpoint’ (*ibid.*: 48). For this reason, she thinks, a useful contribution by African philosophy to the global debate would be to thematize the neglect of critical evaluation of the notion of universality assumed by the majority of liberal theorists and assert the imperative of inserting moral and theoretical conceptions of Africa in the debate (*ibid.*). Failure to do this would be merely perpetuating ‘a form of injustice’ (Masaka, 2017: 80) inherent in the ‘epistemological hegemony’ that characterizes the global justice debate, and renders the debate illusory (*ibid.*: 59).

Indeed, it is hardly difficult to infer from these African standpoints that injustice would occur should global justice theory provide an intellectual framework that sustains the criteria of fairness used by *mediascape* in its reporting on COVID-19 in Africa. Global justice, these voices from African

philosophy intimate, would be ill-placed to prop up criteria on which denigration of African agency supervenes. Hence, its theorists should assess their normative devices and withdraw any that propagates a division of moral labour between liberal and other traditions, for the sake of an inclusive approach to solving global inequities. Flikschuh's appeal for re-orienting global normative thinking presents an attractive summation of these African philosophical proposals. She finds the need for global theorists to be reflexively aware of the conceptual inadequacies of the liberal normative framework – of its contingent validity, and of the disservice that its assumed universality brings to the pursuit of justice. Consequent to this awareness, universalizing liberals must learn how to reason globally, by evolving the capacity to admit of the usefulness of external perspectives for conceptual regeneration (Flikschuh, 2017b). Success with this learning process might lead to recognizing them (non-liberal values) as values that are or might have been possible for us (liberals) (ibid.).

These African philosophical insights, summed up in Flikschuh's proposal, coincide at several points with the proposals in Rawls' *Law of Peoples* discussed earlier on. What I find attractive with these proposals is their wish for intellectual contact across cultures – their invitation to liberal normative theorists to expand their conceptual heritage and horizons without abandoning their commitments to the core of the liberal framework. To see foreign norms as possible for one, all one needs to do is come to see that that norm, which is alien to one's conceptual scheme, is, in fact, a norm that one could have shared. African philosophy is thus constructing a conceptual bridge, to facilitate progress from intentions for tackling the problems of justice globally to practically addressing them.

Community is pivotal in moral reasoning in Africa. It constitutes an object of moral value, and therefore grounds for the moral evaluation of conduct. Likewise, a social dimension is inescapable for public ethical reasoning in Rawls' contractarian position, and in his assessment of the reasonableness of normative theory. No wonder that Mentiki agrees with Rawls on the imperative of conducting public deliberation on norms 'within the frame of a settled community' (Menkiti, 2017: 22), and in bringing normative history and symbolic representations of peoples to bear in these deliberations. In Menkiti's view, Rawls, choice of 'peoples' rather than 'persons' as the authors of the Charter of Peoples is praiseworthy rather than a source of condemnation, and several of the eight principles of justice in the *Law of Peoples* easily resonate with the self-conception and moral vision of several African peoples (ibid.).

## Conclusion

I have argued that intellectual contact of African and liberal normative theorists

is necessary to assess the insular tenets of theorizing prevalent in the global justice debate. Such contact is also necessary to contribute shared perspectives to formulating a framework of values and concepts that would facilitate the implementation of global policy goals for justice. The liberal theoretical hegemony over the debate does not equip its theorists with the tools to perceive the injustice in the misreporting of African achievements in managing COVID-19. Such a scenario propagates a two-fold injustice. It is unjust to Africa because it detracts from its current achievements, and perpetuates centuries of denigration of African agency and reports on its deficiency in contributing to global intellectual culture. It is also unjust to the world, to the extent that it deprives the world of visibility to the underlying norms of the African achievements that could prove useful in problems solving elsewhere.

In seeking inspiration for foundational justification for normative ideals from Africa's cultural contexts in addressing the Covid crisis, African leaders have placed into perspective parochial streaks in the philosophy that proclaim the universal validity of Western ethical and political thinking. They have thus displayed the political will to resist the persistent streak in scholarship that disparages categories of 'tradition' and of the 'past' and have shown how extant normative resources from the African past could be usefully deployed for tolerant coexistence of cultural heritages in the contemporary world.

---

*Martin Odei Ajei*  
*Associate Professor of Philosophy*  
*Department of Philosophy and Classics*  
*University of Ghana*  
*email: [majei@ug.edu.gh](mailto:majei@ug.edu.gh)*



## ***Bibliography***

Akufo-Addo NAD (2020) President Akufo-Addo on Updates to Ghana's Enhanced Response to COVID-19. *The Presidency, Republic of Ghana*. Available at: <https://presidency.gov.gh/index.php/briefing-room/speeches/1560-president-akufo-addo-speaks-on-updates-to-ghana-s-enhanced-response-to-covid-19> (Accessed: 26 April 2020).

Appadurai A (2015) Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy. In: Lechner F J and Boli J (eds.) *The Globalization Reader*, Fifth Edition. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.: 94-102.

Armah-Attoh D, Sanny JAN and Selormey E (2020) Ghanaians' Acceptance of Security-related Restrictions Faces Test with COVID-19 Lockdown. *Afrobarometer Dispatch* 351/2: 1-10.

Beitz CR (2000) *Rawls's Law of Peoples*. *Ethics* 110/4: 669-696.

Beitz CR (2005) Cosmopolitanism and global justice. In: Brock, Gillian, Moellendorf, Darrel (Eds.).

*Current debates in global justice*. Dordrecht: Springer: 11-27.

Beitz CR (2009) *The idea of human rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Buchanan A (2000) *Rawls's law of peoples: Rules for a Vanished Westphalian world*. *Ethics* 110/4: 697-721.

Cabore JW, Karamagi HC, Kipruto H, Asamani JA, Droti B, Seydi ABW and Zawaira F (2020) The potential effects of widespread community transmission of SARS-CoV-2 infection in the World Health Organization African Region: a predictive model. *BMJ Global Health* 5/5: 752-753.

Chan YW and Haines D (2020) Diseasescape: Coping with coronavirus, mobility, and politics. *Global-e*. Available at: <https://www.21global.ucsb.edu/global-e/may-2020/diseasescape-coping-coronavirus-mobility-and-politics> (Accessed: 29 May 2020).

Flikschuh K (2017a) Should African thinkers engage in the global justice debate?. *Philosophical Papers* 46/1: 33-58.

Flikschuh K (2017b) *What is Orientation in Global Thinking? A Kantian Inquiry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ghana Health Service. (2020) *Ghana's outbreak response management updates*. Available at: <https://ghanahealthservice.org/covid19/archive.php> (Accessed: 21 April 2020).

ITU News (2020) *Ghana launches COVID-19 Tracker App*. Available at: <https://news.itu.int/ghana-launches-covid-19-tracker-app/> (Accessed: 20 April 2020).

Hague N (2020) Senegal trials begin for \$1 COVID-19 test kit. *Al Jazeera*. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/senegal-trials-1-covid-19-test-kit-200428132313740.html> (Accessed: 1 May 2020)

Hirsch A (2020) Why are Africa's coronavirus successes being overlooked?. *The Guardian* Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/21/africa-coronavirus->

successes-innovation-europe-us (Accessed: 1 May 2020).

Piling D (2020) Low Covid-19 death toll raises hopes Africa may be spared worst. *Financial Times*. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/e9cf5ed0-a590-4bd6-8c00-b41doc4ae6e0> (Accessed: 30 April 2020).

Lechner FJ and Boli J (Eds.) (2015) *The globalization reader*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

Report Ghana (2020) *Lockdown: Taxi driver strips naked after his vehicle was impounded by security operatives*. Available at: <https://reportghana.com/lockdown-taxi-driver-strips-naked-after-his-vehicle-was-impounded-by-security-operatives-watch-video/> (Accessed: 12 June 2020).

Masaka D (2017) 'Global justice' and the suppressed epistemologies of the indigenous people of Africa. *Philosophical papers* 46/1: 59-84.

CNN Business (2020) *Covid-19 will be horrible in the developing world*. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/business/2020/04/10/melinda-gates-coronavirus.cnn-business> (Accessed: 28 April 2020).

Menkiti I (2017) Africa and global justice. *Philosophical papers* 46/1: 13-32.

Meredith M (2005) *The state of Africa: a history of fifty years of independence*. London: The Free Press.

Nagel T (2005) The problem of global justice. *Philosophy & public affairs* 33/2: 113-147.

Okeja U (2017) Introduction: Globalizing or Transcending Global Justice? *Philosophical Papers* 46/1: 1-11.

Pilling D (2020) Low Covid-19 death toll raises hopes Africa may be spared worst. *Financial Times*. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/e9cf5ed0-a590-4bd6-8c00-b41doc4ae6e0> (Accessed: 28 April 2020).

Pogge T and Rawls R (1989) *Realizing Rawls*. Ithaca (NY): Cornell University Press.

Rawlingson K (2020) Coronavirus latest: 23 March at a glance. *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/23/coronavirus-at-a-glance-23-mar-evening> (Accessed: 8 June 2020).

Rawls J (1971) *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Rawls J (1980) Kantian constructivism in moral theory. *The journal of philosophy* 77/9: 515-572.

Rawls J (1993) *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press

Rawls J (1999) *The law of peoples: with, the idea of public reason revisited*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Sabbagh D, Hern A and Protor K (2020) The UK racing to improve contact-tracing app's privacy safeguards. *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/may/05/uk-racing-to-improve-contact-tracing-apps-privacy-safeguards> (Accessed: 13 June 2020).

Scheffler S (2014) The idea of global justice: A progress report. *The Harvard Review of Philosophy*, 20: 17-35.

Taiwo O (1993) Colonialism and its aftermath: The crisis of knowledge production. *Callaloo* 16/4: 891-908.

Rawlinson K (2020) Coronavirus latest: 23 March at a glance. *The Guardian*.

Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/23/coronavirus-at-a-glance-23-mar-evening> (Accessed: 8 June 2020).

Thompson D (2020) What's Behind South Korea's COVID-19 Exceptionalism?. *The Atlantic*.

Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/whats-south-koreas-secret/611215/> (Accessed: 30 May 2020).

Twahirwa Rwema JO, Diouf D, Phaswana-Mafuya N, Rusatira JC, Manouan A, Uwizeye E, Drame FM, Tamoufe U and Baral SD (2020) COVID-19 Across Africa: Epidemiologic Heterogeneity and Necessity of Contextually Relevant Transmission Models and Intervention Strategies. *Annals of internal medicine* 173/9: 752-753

UNECA (2020) *COVID-19 in Africa, Protecting Lives and Economies*. UNECA. Available at: <https://repository.uneca.org/handle/10855/43756> (Accessed: 11 May 2020).

University of Ghana (2020) University of Ghana scientists sequence genomes of novel coronavirus. Available at : <https://www.ug.edu.gh/news/news-release-university-ghana-scientists-sequence-genomes-novel-coronavirus> (Accessed: 10 June 2020).

Worldometer (2020) *Covid-19 Coronavirus Pandemic*. Available at: [https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/?utm\\_campaign=homeAdvegas1?%22%20%5Cl%20%22countries](https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/?utm_campaign=homeAdvegas1?%22%20%5Cl%20%22countries) (Accessed: 27 November 2020).