

Is Caring a Virtue or Justice? Remembering Henry Odera Oruka

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Common sense often leads us to assume that when conditions of the world change, humans will adopt the best means of adjusting to such changes, including designing and applying moral principles best amenable to different times. Shrunk by developments in communication science and technology that essentially have enhanced migration and permanently transformed the idea of home and neighbor, adjustments in relations at both public and private levels have brought about pluralistic views of culture to go with a growing sense of cosmopolitanism. But other senses of responsibility that would go with this pluralistic recognition have not taken roots. Specifically, recognition of the once-distant populations as our neighbors has not led to modification in distributive principles to go along with a needed collective social justice required by our shrunken world. As a result, our contemporary world continues to be defined by many contradictory and polar-opposed characteristics, among them, on the one hand, the amazing levels of advancement in science and technology whose objective is to combat most known threats to humanity in the domain of health and, on the other, the most glaring and worsening state of global poverty, disease, conflict, and suffering. And while the idea of justice has arisen to the top list of philosophical preoccupations as a way of addressing some of the social fragmentations that lie at the root of such conflict and suffering, it has become obvious that old ideas of just what that justice means keeps many thinkers from defining and addressing contemporary problems effectively. In his works, the Kenya-born philosopher Henry Odera Oruka (1944 - 1995) persistently, and consistently, made proposals for a different moral approach to addressing, and possibly solving, some of the root causes of human conflicts across the world. I will call it “taking suffering seriously” as the basis of his idea of a global-level collective justice which, for him, raised the idea of the ethics of care to the level of global justice. I propose in this paper to show that this concern can be found to be pervasive in Oruka’s works, connecting many of his well known positions as well as less known ones, and to discuss its philosophical merits