

Clyde Cabico

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PHIL 355E

Moral Tool: *Ubuntu*

In the story, *The Little Black Box*, by Phillip K. Dick blends together a mystical device referred to as an empathy box that allows people to telepathically connect mentally and emotionally to a person named Wilbur Mercer. Pain and suffering are emphasized throughout and early on in the introduction, “a rock was thrown at Mercer—Everyone who’s holding onto his empathy box, Joan realized, felt that along with Mercer.” (Dick) Here, the moral idea of Ubuntu starts to present itself and unfold throughout the story through the Mercerites and how this moral idea poses a threat to the repressive government.

A repressive government is fueled by individualism, assisting in stability and control for the following reasons. First, in a society that isolates people, no communal and collectively shared bonds can be formed. The competitiveness of people “rely on thy self,” obstructs collaboration. If people were to empathize with one another and collectively understand pain, suffering, and success, ideas of revolt could invoke a civil war. The idea of Ubuntu, I am because we are, catalyzes the formulation of shared identity and communal responsibility, fostering unity among individuals. This unity threatens authoritarian regimes, as a society bound by empathy and collective well-being is more likely to challenge oppression and demand systemic change.



Deployment of loyal government law enforcement officials is easier to formulate by oppressive and authoritative regimes when individualism dominates, as people are less likely to unite in opposition and more likely to prioritize personal interests over collective welfare. This isolation makes it easier for the government to recruit and control law enforcement officials who are loyal to the regime since they can appeal for personal gain or fear of punishment. Mr. Lee in the story is one of two prime examples. “By the United States Government,” Mr. Lee said. “I have read your mind and I learn that you know that Ray Meritan is a prominent Mercerite and you yourself are attracted to Mercerism.” An undercover agent for the government, Mr. Lee devotes himself to the repression of the Mercerite movement that follows with, “this current Mercer crisis,” (Dick) highlighting the threat of Mercerism. Individualism is shown here as it isolates members of society from the collective empathy promoted by Mercerism, making them more susceptible to the government's control. Mr. Lee's commitment to undermining the movement reflects how authoritarian regimes use individualism to impede collective solidarity, viewing empathy as a dangerous force that could unify people against the state. “Let's stick to basics—the Mercerite Party and its rapid growth all over the planet.”—Mr. Lee said, “You are right, of course.” (Dick) By focusing on personal gain and loyalty to the regime, Mr. Lee embodies the way individualism can be weaponized which is to suppress movements built on shared human experiences. Without strong social bonds or a sense of shared responsibility, these officials are less likely to question orders or empathize with the communities they are tasked with oppressing.

“Mercer’s message (p. 31), is simply that we are here, and we are together, and that no one is coming to save us—and, thus, perhaps that we must become our own saviors,” (Fox et al.) is significant to the central moral principle Ubuntu. Wilbur Mercer, being able to share to an



extent the physical pain of rocks being thrown at him, pain and fear of persecution of the Mercer movement, fosters connection of sympathy and more importantly empathy. By participating in one another's suffering, people strengthen their communal bonds, making it harder for authoritarian regimes to suppress dissent. "Twenty million people are followers of Wilbur Mercer now. All over the world. And they're suffering with him, as he walks along toward Pueblo, Colorado." (Dick) This shared pain becomes a rallying point for collective resistance, threatening a central concept that supports a repressive and authoritative government; individualism—stability, and control.



### Works Cited

Dick, Philip K. *Little Black Box*. Gollancz, 1990.

Fox et al. *About Ubuntu*. [canvas.odu.edu/courses/165878/pages/about-ubuntu?module\\_item\\_id=6850993](https://canvas.odu.edu/courses/165878/pages/about-ubuntu?module_item_id=6850993). Accessed 9 Sept. 2024.