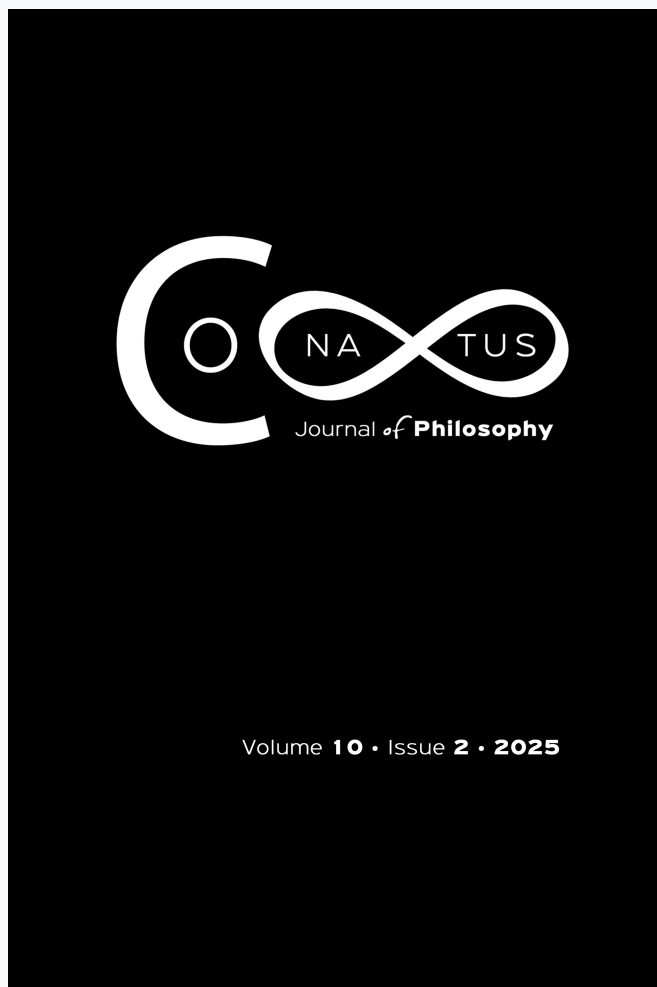


## Conatus - Journal of Philosophy

Vol 10, No 2 (2025)

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy



### Ubuntu as Social Ethics

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doi: [10.12681/cjp.33311](https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.33311)

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#### To cite this article:

Eyesan, S. (2025). Ubuntu as Social Ethics. *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 10(2), 105–129.  
<https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.33311>

# Ubuntu as Social Ethics

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## Abstract

*This paper explores the indigenous African philosophy of Ubuntu and its implications as both a worldview and social ethics. It argues that Ubuntu not only describes the African understanding of personhood, emphasizing connectedness, interdependency, and relatedness, but also prescribes a moral framework grounded in principles such as identity, solidarity, tolerance, justice, respect, compassion, and human dignity. By clarifying Ubuntu's principles and differentiating it from related concepts such as community, communalism, communism, and communitarianism, the paper addresses the following key questions: What is Ubuntu? How does it differ from similar concepts? What values define Ubuntu? Can Ubuntu contribute meaningfully to global ethical discourses? This paper significantly dwells on the individual-community debate within the context of Ubuntu philosophy, arguing that Ubuntu philosophy offers a compelling ethical alternative in the face of the prevailing dominant social paradigm of exploitation, oppression, hatred, division, religious conflicts, terrorism, and intolerance at the local and international levels.*

**Keywords:** *Ubuntu; human values; communitarianism; individualism; interconnectedness; African ethics; Western ethics*

## I. Introduction

The question of how human beings ought to live in society has preoccupied philosophers across cultures and historical periods. This age-old question has elicited diverse answers from many scholars and remains relevant in contemporary ethical debates. This paper attempts to provide an answer to the same question through the lens of Ubuntu, a distinctly African philosophy that emphasizes the relational nature of human existence and the primacy of communal values in shaping moral life.

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Received: 29 January 2023 | Revised: 19 October 2025 | Accepted: 27 October 2025

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The systematic and defined attempt to present *Ubuntu* as a description of the African personality, as a social ethic, and its place at the global stage defines the uniqueness of this work. As a moral framework, *Ubuntu* prioritises values such as solidarity, justice, compassion, respect, and human dignity, not only within African societies but as guiding principles for global coexistence. The unique contribution of this study lies in its attempt to systematize *Ubuntu* as both an expression of African identity and a viable ethical model capable of addressing contemporary social challenges. In the next section, a brief attempt will be made to differentiate *Ubuntu* from related concepts such as community, communalism, and communitarianism.

## II. Understanding *Ubuntu* through its affinities: Community, communalism, and communitarianism

A clear understanding of *Ubuntu* requires distinguishing it from several concepts with which it is often conflated, including community, communalism, and communitarianism. While these terms share certain philosophical and social connotations, each has a distinct meaning that enriches the broader discourse on *Ubuntu*.

### i. Community

The first concept to examine is community. The concept of community has been looked at from different angles: as a geographical area, a group of individuals living within a defined place, and community as an area of common life. At its core, a community involves two related suggestions: that the members of a group have something in common with each other, and that the thing held in common distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other possible groups.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the idea of community implies both similarity and difference.<sup>2</sup>

Community refers to a human organization that is bound together by a common belief, a common purpose, a sense of solidarity and identity, and a set of shared values that all members of the community agree to. This human organization is different from a state, nation, society, or family. What is central to a community is that it is a motley group of people or a gathering of human beings, which may be large or small, that are bound together by primitive shared communicable ideas

<sup>1</sup> Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (Tavistock, 1985), 12.

<sup>2</sup> On the conceptual nuances of community and the dangers of treating it as a homogenous moral category see Babalola Joseph Balogun, "How not to Understand Community: A Critical Engagement with R. Bellah," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (2023): 55-76.

and values bordering on a common focus in religion, a profession, or a general calling.<sup>3</sup> Examples of communities in this light are the Church of God Mission Church (CGM), the Catholic community, the Nigerian intelligence community, and the university community. There are also e-communities, such as the community of users of or members of Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter (now X), etc. In sum, a community can have a physical location or a virtual presence. Regardless of form, its essential attributes are the set of values shared by the members of the community, a feeling of identity or solidarity, and a common purpose. Communication is another important element in a community, for without it, there can hardly be a community.

## ii. Communalism

Essentially, communalism is the idea that the human person in Africa is a social being that cannot be isolated from the society to which he belongs. It is rooted in the belief that an individual's existence and identity are inseparable from the community to which they belong. It means that the human person in Africa is not and cannot be complete as a social being unless the rest of the community participates in his life. To live an isolated life is to be an incomplete being, because man is a social being by nature. Simply put, the life of an individual is only meaningful within the context of the community.

Communalism is a social ethic that is most often associated with African society. At the heart of the idea of communalism are the displays of solidarity and the feeling of belongingness among people, as well as the quest for identity. As noted by Mbiti, African communities are defined by the fact that they are knit together by a web of kinship relations and other social structures.<sup>4</sup> In traditional African societies, communalism is expressed in the customs and practices of the people, such as feelings of togetherness and intimacy, as well as communal ownership of land.

## iii. Communism

While communalism and communism are sometimes confused due to their shared emphasis on collective life, they are conceptually distinct. Communism is primarily a political and economic ideology. For some political scholars and theorists, such as the Marxists, communism is the

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Ogochukwu Ujomudike, "Ubuntu Ethics," in *Encyclopedia of Global Bioethics*, ed. Henk Ten Have, 1-14 (Springer, 2015), 4.

<sup>4</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Heinemann, 1969), 208.

end of human political history. According to this philosophy, human society arrives at a final point or stage after going through several stages, starting from primitive, feudal, capitalist, and socialist. Essentially, the final stage of the communist vision is a communist state, or, better put, socialism, which is basically a classless, egalitarian social system. The communist engages and crushes the preexisting oppressive, profiteering, domineering, and unequal system of capitalism to arrive at the communist vision.

While communism critiques capitalism for fostering discrimination, dehumanization, exploitation, and the commodification of the human person, its concerns are largely material and structural rather ethical or relational. *Ubuntu*, in contrast, is not an economic ideology but a moral and cultural philosophy that prioritizes human dignity and relational harmony over material structures.

#### iv. Communitarianism

Communitarianism is a social and political philosophy that arose in the 1980s as a critique of contemporary liberalism, which seeks to protect and promote individual rights and autonomy and, above all, emphasizes the unique place of the individual in society. As Kymlicka observes, communitarianism challenges liberalism because the liberal ideology is too individualistic and often ignores the fact that human beings desire and rely on communal relationships.<sup>5</sup> An essential feature of communitarianism is its opposition to individualism. That is, communitarianism holds that:

[...] though the individual is the basic material of the universe, just as individualism or liberalism professes, and that everything needs to work to the individual's benefit, yet in a very important sense, the individual has an obligation to society. This obligation, in a deep sense, creates a situation where the individual can no longer say categorically that he is more important than the society. This is because without the society, he will have no meaning as a social, political, economic, and even ontological being.<sup>6</sup>

At the heart of the communitarian argument is the view that the individual cannot achieve its full individuality without community. Hence,

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<sup>5</sup> Will Kymlicka, "Communitarianism," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Donald M. Borchert (Thomson Gale, 2006), 368-369.

<sup>6</sup> Ujomudike, 4.

community is a very important tool in the life and survival of the individual. As Okolo notes,

My identity is partly constituted by the community. What I am is partly what the community has made of me. I do not have the definition of my *self* priori, or outside of community ties, obligations, care, love, rules, and customs and tradition (Omenala).<sup>7</sup>

This simply means that “the value of the self is, thus, dependent on its interrelation with other selves, where a communal relationship is formed, hence, from *onwe m* to *onwe anyyi* ‘myself’ to ‘ourselves.’”<sup>8</sup> *Ubuntu* echoes this view, but it extends beyond philosophical argumentation to embody a lived cultural ethic grounded in African traditions of interdependence and collective care. We now turn our attention to a discussion on the origin and meaning of *Ubuntu*.

### III. Western ethical theories as a philosophical background for understanding *Ubuntu*

To appreciate the ethical significance of *Ubuntu*, it is useful to examine certain Western ethical theories that provide a philosophical background for its justification and contrast. While many ethical frameworks exist, this paper focuses on three major traditions – Aristotelian virtue ethics, utilitarianism, and Kantian deontology because of their historical influence and their distinct contrast with *Ubuntu*’s communitarian ethos.

There is no better place to begin this intellectual engagement than ancient Greece and the work of one of the masters of philosophy, Aristotle. Aristotle’s ethics is virtue-oriented and teleological, as can be found in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Basically, Aristotle views the individual as both a rational and social being, whose goal is to be virtuous and happy through reason. He sees virtue as a rational activity. Hence, virtue comprises essentially the use of one’s ability to act purposefully in conformity with one’s intellectual insight. It means the application of intelligence to practical situations and concrete actions.<sup>9</sup> The virtuous act is the mean between two extremes. Aristotle proposes moderation

<sup>7</sup> Chukwudum Barnabas Okolo, *What Is to Be African? Essay on African Identity* (Cepta, 1993), 355.

<sup>8</sup> Anayochukwu Kingsley Ugwu, “An Igbo Understanding of the Human Being: A Philosophical Approach,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (2022): 143.

<sup>9</sup> William S. Sahakian, *History of Philosophy* (Barnes & Noble, 1968), 73.

as a critical principle of ethical evaluation. His cardinal virtues include courage, justice, temperance, and wisdom. Aristotle views each virtue as a mean between two vices, an excess of something and a deficiency of something.<sup>10</sup> Reason helps man to be virtuous and to achieve happiness, which is the purpose of man.

While Aristotle's framework remains influential, its limitations become evident when contrasted with *Ubuntu*. First, Aristotle's ethics, precisely his overemphasis on individual rationality, raises questions about his exclusion of other forms of moral knowledge. According to him, virtue is an activity in line with reason. This is purely a rationalist position, which downplays other moral frameworks like compassion, empathy, intuition, and relational wisdom, which are the foundations of many non-Western traditions like *Ubuntu*. Second, although Aristotle recognizes justice as a virtue benefiting others, his ethical system largely centers on the moral development of the individual rather than the collective well-being of the community.<sup>11</sup> This highly individualistic orientation on moral development and justice makes it problematic and unsuitable as an ethical framework that unifies people together as human beings, and this explains why *Ubuntu* social ethics is pushed forward as a better alternative.

Another ethical theory is utilitarianism, which can be traced to Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. It is a consequentialist ethical framework that evaluates actions based on their outcomes. According to the consequentialist, no action is inherently right or wrong. It is an outcome-driven, individual-summation system of ethics. This theory generally holds that an action is morally valid if it brings about the greatest good/happiness for the greatest number of people. The proper standard of right and wrong, good or bad, is the principle of utility. A major problem that this moral stand triggers is that of measurement: how do we measure and compare increases and decreases in people's happiness? Also, while this theory appears to be communitarian, as it talks about the greatest good of the greatest number of people, it does not fully cover the notions of community, relationality, and interconnectedness that are at the heart of *Ubuntu* ethics.

While utilitarianism lacks some relational criteria, we will now take a look at Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics to see if it offers anything different. Kant sees the individual as a rational, autonomous moral agent whose worth lies in his capacity for rational self-development. Kant's brand of ethics is rooted in universalism and reason. That

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<sup>10</sup> Emmett Barcalow, *Moral Philosophy: Theory and Issues* (Wadsworth, 1994), 97.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

is, an action is morally acceptable if and only if the maxim the individual is following is morally acceptable. If we are following a maxim that's not morally acceptable, the action is wrong, but how can we determine whether a maxim is morally acceptable? Kant argues that a maxim is morally acceptable if and only if one could consistently will that it becomes a universal law.<sup>12</sup> Clearly, Kantian ethics gives no room for outcome, solidarity, or communal relations. This again contrasts with *Ubuntu ethics*; as a communitarian ethic, *Ubuntu* is context and culturally sensitive, grounded in dialogue, empathy, group solidarity, and harmony, while Kantian ethics focus on the universal nature of morality. This rigid focus on universality and duty makes it highly individualistic and inflexible as a theory. *Ubuntu*, on the other hand, is relational and communal and promotes contextual narratives. Though when examined critically, we could find some meeting points between the two ethical theories, especially in their respect for human dignity. Both theories promote respect for human dignity, but they ground it differently. Kant in rational autonomy, and *Ubuntu* in relational interdependence.

In sum, one thing that is common between the Western ethical frameworks discussed above and *Ubuntu ethics* is that they all deal with human beings and human nature. However, Aristotle's virtue ethics, utilitarianism, and Kantian ethics differ from the brand of ethics we are proposing in this work. One obvious feature of these three Western ethical frameworks is their promotion of individualism, which has necessitated the push for an alternative ethics that unites and promotes togetherness, compassion, solidarity, and love, and transcends individual achievement and rational calculation. This communal orientation makes *Ubuntu* particularly relevant for addressing the moral and social challenges of contemporary societies, which are often shaped by individualism and competition. This communal orientation is not unique to *Ubuntu* but is also found in other African moral systems, such as Igbo ethics. The following section comparatively examines both traditions to show the moral insights each system offers.

#### IV. *Ubuntu* and other African moral systems: The case of Igbo ethics

Before we delve into a detailed discussion on *Ubuntu*, it is important to situate this work within the ongoing conversation on African ethics. Thus, we must briefly examine *Ubuntu* alongside other indigenous African moral systems, like Igbo ethics. Suffice it to state that while

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 137

*Ubuntu* is well known among Southern African people, the Igbo moral framework, with its different brands, shares some similarities and differences. In addition, while African moral thought shares a communal-relational orientation, it is not monolithic.

The Igbo ethical system is basically communal, just like *Ubuntu*. The communal nature of Igbo ethics is tied to the customs (*omenala*) of the people. One point of convergence between both *Ubuntu* and Igbo moral frameworks is in their conception of the person (*mma-ndu* or *mmadu*) and the community. *Mma-ndu* in Igbo means *the beauty of life*.<sup>13</sup> The notion of personhood is central in both frameworks. In Igbo thought, personhood is not achieved at birth but is achieved in the community. This simply means that an individual cannot attain personhood outside the community. This is clearly reflected in the Igbo saying *onye bu mmadu bu mmadu n'ih i ndi ozo*, meaning *one is a person because of others*. This mirrors the popular *Ubuntu* principle *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, meaning *a person is a person through other persons*. So, both ethical frameworks affirm that personhood is possible only within the context of the community. This means that to relate is to be human. The human person cannot be human outside the parameters of relationality.<sup>14</sup>

While self-realisation is possible only through active participation in communal life, there are values that must be exhibited in such participation. Igbo ethics lays emphasis on good character (*idi mma* or *omume oma*) as the basis of moral life. A good person, according to the Igbo, is one who carries out morally admirable actions. Such a person would be decent, honourable and just. However, it is not enough to refrain from moral vices; in addition, an *ezigbo mmadu* (a good person) should abhor or detest socially reprehensible actions. Among the Igbo, a good person is generally known in the community as *onye na edozi obodo* (literally, one who sets things right in the community).<sup>15</sup> In a similar vein, *Ubuntu* emphasizes values such as compassion, solidarity, dialogue, respect, justice, etc. However, there is a spiritual dimension in Igbo ethics, particularly as it has to do with the notion of *chi* (personal destiny). According to this view, while communal values

<sup>13</sup> Anthony Udoka Ezebuio, Emeka Simon Ejim, and Innocent Anthony Uke, "Just War Determination through Human Acts Valuation: An Igbo-African Experience," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2024): 204.

<sup>14</sup> Ikehukwu Anthony Kanu, "Igwebuike as an Igbo-African Relational Ethical Theory," *SIST Journal of Religion and Humanities* 2, no. 1 (2022): 89

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Agulanna, "Ezigbo Mmadu: An Exploration of the Igbo Concept of a Good Person," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 4, no. 5 (2011): 149.

are important, individual actions must be in line with one's divine destiny. It is through such harmony that self-realization is possible.

Furthermore, while the Igbo moral framework is communal in nature, it gives room for the celebration of individual exploits but only within the collective. Specifically, the Igbo philosophy of *Ikenga* (personal achievement and strength of character) points to the fact that individuality can be celebrated, but it must be done within the collective. According to Asouzu's complementary ontology, the individual and the community are inseparably linked, with neither attaining full realization outside the other. Similarly, Kanu, in his *Igwebuike* ethical theory, emphasized complementarity, relationship and communion as the basic features of his brand of Igbo ethics. According to him, human fellowship and cooperation are a reality that is rooted in human nature, and to keep away from relating is to place a limitation on our being.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the similarities between *Ubuntu* and Igbo ethics, they differ in their philosophical emphasis. *Ubuntu* is more relational and communal in approach as it lays emphasis on the interdependence of human beings and the place of the community in achieving personhood. Igbo ethics, with its various variants, balances the communal aspect with an appreciation of the place of personal achievement (*ikenga*) and industriousness. So, in a way, while the Igbos are known to have strong communal dispositions or attachment, they are also known to possess a high level of individualism.<sup>17</sup> *Ubuntu* also differs from Igbo ethics because, whereas the former is presented as a normative principle of humanness, the latter incorporates spirituality, thereby linking morality to traditions and customs. The incorporation of spirituality in Igbo ethics is clearly seen in Igbo conception of man as a composition of *Mmuo* (spirit), *Onwe* (Self), *Obi* (heart), *Chi* and then *Ahu* (Body). Through this, it becomes clear that the human person is more of a spiritual constitution, and the combination of these different elements makes him superior to the mere physical constitution.<sup>18</sup> So, while *Ubuntu* shares some features with other African ethical frameworks, it differs from them fundamentally and therefore cannot be completely identified with them. In addition, *Ubuntu* is distinct by not being a proposal or an invention of any thinker, nor is it the ideology of any country. It is this strong distinct philosophical appeal that *Ubuntu* expresses that this work intends to explore and discuss.

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<sup>16</sup> Kanu, 94.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Agulanna, "Community and Human Well-being in an African Culture," *Trames* 14, no. 3 (2010): 293.

<sup>18</sup> Ugwu, 141.

## V. Origin and meaning of *Ubuntu*

*Ubuntu* is a term that originates from the Bantu language. It is a term that is widely used in the southern parts of Africa. Linguistically, many scholars have posited that *Ubuntu* is an Nguni concept that means ‘personhood.’<sup>19</sup> However, the term is not limited or exclusive to the Nguni people; instead, it is found among some other African ethnic groups under different names. In Shona, for example, it is called *unhu*, and in Sotho, it is *botho*. *Ubuntu* is made up of two words: *ubu* and *ntu*. In analyzing these two words, Ramose opines that *Ubu* evokes the idea of being in general. It is enfolded before it manifests itself in the concrete form or mode of ex-istence of a particular entity. *Ubu* as enfolded being is always oriented towards unfoldment, that is, incessant, continual concrete manifestation through particular forms and modes. In this sense, *ubu* is always oriented towards *-ntu*.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, ontologically, there is no division between *ubu* and *ntu*. *Ntu* is the concrete manifestation of *ubu*. The idea of *Ubuntu* is best captured in the popular maxim *umuntu ngumuntu nga bantu*, meaning that to be a human being is to affirm one’s humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish humane relations with them. According to Ramose, *Ubuntu* is understood as be-ing human (human-ness); a humane, respectful, and polite attitude towards others constitutes the core of this aphorism.<sup>21</sup> Hence, *Ubuntu* becomes a foundation and standard for ethical and social judgment because of its normativity.

According to Mbigi, *Ubuntu* is the essence of being human, and it embodies a positive perception of African personhood.<sup>22</sup> Central to the philosophy of *Ubuntu* is a unique positive humanism and portrays the essence of humanness that is founded on interdependence and solidarity. Writing in this light, Richardson affirms that *Ubuntu* refers to the collective interdependence and solidarity of communities of affection. *Ubuntu* is concerned with the welfare of everyone in the community.<sup>23</sup> Hence, in a way, *Ubuntu* is an African worldview of life. It is an expression of how Africans perceive and relate to the world. The point to take is that *Ubuntu* is predominantly African humanism.

<sup>19</sup> Lovemore Mbigi, *The Spirit of African Leadership* (Knowres Publishing Pty Ltd, 2005), 69.

<sup>20</sup> Mogobe B. Ramose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu* (Mond Books Publishers, 2005), 36.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>22</sup> Mbigi, 69.

<sup>23</sup> Robert N. Richardson, “Reflections on Reconciliation and Ubuntu,” In *Persons in Community: African Ethics in Global Culture*, ed. Ronald Nicolson, 19-25 (University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, 2008), 19.

Furthermore, it is important to note that *Ubuntu* is a philosophical ethic. It is an African philosophy of life that pushes for some ethical values and principles. *Ubuntu* philosophy finds its key embodiment in the Zulu expression *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which means a person can only be a person through others – often reduced to ‘I am because we are’ in English.<sup>24</sup> Further, it also finds its root in the Northern Sotho aphorism such as *motho ke motho ke batho*, which is a simplification of *Ubuntu*. What it means to be human is to affirm one’s humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on this basis, establishing respectful human relations with them. *Ubuntu* is relational ethics. As a relational ethics, it shows us how we ought to relate to others and how we ought to live in society. It is a belief in the interdependence and interconnectivity of human beings. Therefore, it means that my humanity is caught up with the humanity of the next person.

Suffice it to state that the above discussed features of *Ubuntu* do not imply that its philosophy is anti-individualistic. Instead, *Ubuntu*’s respect for the particularity of others links closely to its respect for individuality. This is because *Ubuntu* defines the individual in terms of his or her relationship with others.<sup>25</sup> Hence, *Ubuntu* must not be confused with privileging or prioritizing of the community over the individuals in society. The community is relevant because it is the medium through which an individual fulfills their potential. A crucial attribute of *Ubuntu* is interdependence. *Ubuntu*, in this light, is a social ethics.

## VI. Building an ethics of *Ubuntu*

*Ubuntu*, aside from being a factual description of the African worldview, is also a social ethic, which is a rule of conduct or behaviour. First, what is ethics, and why is ethics needed by human beings? Ethics is important and needed in society because it is one of the social instruments or structures for moderating human actions and behaviours in order to have a peaceful and meaningful society. Other social structures for moderating human actions are laws and conventions. Basically, ethics is concerned with the rules for deciding the wrongness or rightness of an action. There are several theories that have been propounded by scholars in this light. For some Africans, the human experience can be promoted positively

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<sup>24</sup> Mbigi, 1-7.

<sup>25</sup> Dirk J. Louw, “The African Concept of Ubuntu and Restorative Justice,” In *Handbook of Restorative Justice: A Global Perspective*, edited by Dennis Sullivan and Larry Tiftt, 161-171 (Routledge, 2006): 168.

through the philosophy and ethics of Ubuntu.<sup>26</sup> What, then, is *Ubuntu* ethics?

*Ubuntu* is ethical because it emphasizes the inherently social nature of human beings. Fundamentally, human beings are social animals because they were created to live together. Also, human beings are social because they need to cooperate with one another in order to attain the common good. Pursuing the common good is a central element of the social, ethical, or moral life.<sup>27</sup> Hence, *Ubuntu* is an African world view that has normative implications. The pursuit of the common good is aimed at the welfare of everyone in the community, and this is essentially the spirit of *Ubuntu*, which is rooted in solidarity, care, compassion, and interdependence.

As a rule of conduct, *Ubuntu* not only describes human beings as relational beings, but also prescribes what this entails. A good example of the normative nature of *Ubuntu* is when we consider the Nguni and Sotho-Tswana aphorisms *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* and *motho ke motho ke batho babang*, which in plain English would simply mean our well-being or survival is dependent on others. However, when the native Nguni and Sotho speakers make such statements, they are, in the first instance, tersely capturing a normative account of what we ought to most value in life. One's ultimate goal in life should be to become a complete person, a true self, or a genuine human being.<sup>28</sup> What this clearly shows is that the assertion that 'a person is a person' is a call to develop one's (moral) personhood, a prescription to acquire *ubuntu* or *botho*, to exhibit humanness.<sup>29</sup> To develop and exhibit one's humanness entails displaying certain values in our everyday lives. *Ubuntu* ethics emphasizes some ethical values. According to Mokgoro,

Group solidarity, compassion, respect, human dignity, humanistic orientation, and collective unity have, among others, been defined as key social values of *Ubuntu*. Because of the expansive nature of the concept, its social value will always depend on the approach and the purpose for which it is depended on. Thus its value has also been viewed as a basis for a morality of cooperation, compassion, communalism and concern for the interest of the collective respect

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<sup>26</sup> Ujomudike, 5.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Thaddeus Metz, "Ubuntu as a Moral Theory and Human Rights in South African," *Human Rights Law Journal* 11 (2011): 537.

<sup>29</sup> Metz, 537.

for the dignity of personhood, all the time emphasizing the virtues of that dignity in social relationship and practices.<sup>30</sup>

From the above, it can be deduced that *Ubuntu* defends a unique conception of the human person that is based on the intrinsic worth of the human person and not an instrumental one. The worth of a human being is expressed in his dignity. This self-dignity is intrinsic and comes as a result of one being a human being, and dignity requires that humans be addressed and treated in ways that demonstrate their intrinsic worth, free will, freedom, and responsibility to themselves and others.<sup>31</sup> Our deepest moral obligation, according to *Ubuntu* ethics, is to become more fully human. And the only way to achieve this is by entering community with others, which is by living out the values embedded in *Ubuntu*.

## VII. Values and principles of *Ubuntu*

### i. *Ubuntu* and self-worth: The value of human life and human dignity

One important aspect of *Ubuntu* ethics is its unique conception of the human person, vis-a-vis human dignity. A high premium is placed on human life and human dignity. This respect for human life rests on the belief that a human being has an intrinsic worth that cannot be quantified in instrumental terms. The value of a human being is seen and accepted in his self-worth and dignity. The dignity of man is intrinsic to man and acts as the basis of all other claims about him.<sup>32</sup> This dignity comes naturally to a human being by virtue of being human. Consequently, this last assertion demands a special kind of respect and treatment for all human beings as a way of recognizing their intrinsic worth. Writing on this, Wood, Bertsch and Clark opine that human dignity presupposes that each human being is considered an end in himself and is not a mere instrument to enhance the values of some higher entity, for example, a state or dictator.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Yvonne Mokgoro, "Ubuntu and the Law in South African," *Buffalo Human Rights Law Review* 4 (1998): 15-23.

<sup>31</sup> Ujomudike, 5.

<sup>32</sup> For a concise analytical treatment of dignity as an intrinsic moral predicate see Filimon Peonidis, "Making Sense of Dignity: A Starting Point," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (2020): 85-100.

<sup>33</sup> David M. Wood, Gary K. Bertsch, and Robert P. Clark, *Comparing Political Systems: Power and Policy in Three Worlds* (Macmillan, 1991), 18.

According to Bujo, life is the highest principle of ethical conduct.<sup>34</sup> It takes precedence over all ethical considerations and beliefs. Human life is sacred and, as such, demands a certain kind of recognition and respect regardless of colour, race, tribe, religion, and nationality. The self-evident truth that no human being can give life also entails that no human being should take the life of another. Hence, the morality of an act is determined by its life-giving potential.<sup>35</sup> Implied in this respect for human life and dignity are the ethical principles of compassion, dialogue, patience, tolerance, and respect for diversity.

The value of human life that *Ubuntu* preaches does not mean an accommodation of life-threatening actions from individual members of a community. Simply put, because the common good must have priority over the individual good, an individual who truly poses a danger to the community or endangers the clan by taking assets or lives must be removed.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, the main goal of African ethics is, fundamentally, life itself. The community is at the service of Earth's life.<sup>37</sup>

## ii. The self and the community

### a. Interconnectedness and interrelatedness

The notions and values of interconnectedness and interrelatedness are prevalent in African society. Fundamentally, *Ubuntu* is about the intrinsic connectedness of humanity and human beings in general. All human beings partake in a single humanity and, as such, are intrinsically connected. This interconnectedness should therefore propel all human beings to relate together as one family. In *Ubuntu* ethics, life is participatory, and the life of the individual is incomplete outside the community. The individual participates in the community as a social being, and the community shares in the life of the individual in return. There is a constant flow of relatedness. Any break in this flow signals danger in the social and ethical makeup of the community. Accordingly, being with others is not added on to a pre-existing and self-sufficient being; instead, both the individual (the self) and the collective find themselves interconnected within a complete entity where their relationships already exist. By nature, a person is interdependent with other people.<sup>38</sup> The interdependency aspect of *Ubuntu* connotes that no man is an is-

<sup>34</sup> Benezet Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1992), 235.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> John Macquarrie, *Existentialism* (Penguin, 1973), 383.

land. We all depend on one another for survival and progress.

The realization and acknowledgement of the interdependency of human beings is encapsulated in what Teffo calls respecting the *historicality* of others. Respecting the *historicality* of the other means respecting his or her dynamic nature.<sup>39</sup> This simply means that a person who is grounded in the ethics of *Ubuntu* is open (not rigid) and available to others; he or she does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper sense of self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.<sup>40</sup>

#### b. Community with others

The starting point of African ethics, and in this case, *Ubuntu* ethics, as has been opined by some African scholars, is community. Hence, one cardinal aspect of *Ubuntu* is community with others. This principle, as sufficiently discussed by Thaddeus Metz in his article *Ubuntu as a Theory and Human Rights in South Africa*, sits at the foundation of the idea of *Ubuntu*. This is because it portrays the social and ethical characteristics of *Ubuntu*. What then does it mean to seek out community with others within the context of the *Ubuntu* philosophy? Does it mean to yield to the yearnings and desires of the majority in society? Is it the same as conforming to the norms of one's group or association?

To seek out community with others within the notion of *Ubuntu* can be understood using two recurrent and dominant themes in African discourse, as enunciated by Thaddeus Metz. These two themes are "identity" and "solidarity."<sup>41</sup> Community with others encapsulates the ideas of identity and solidarity. But what does it mean to identify with others? Simply put, it means for people to think of themselves as members of the same group, that is, to conceive of themselves as a 'We' for them to take pride or feel shame in the group's activities, as well as for them to engage in joint projects, co-coordinating their behavior to realize shared ends.<sup>42</sup> To identify entails a feeling of brotherhood and total involvement in a group and its activities. It means for people to think of themselves as part and parcel of the same group, there-

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<sup>39</sup> Joe Teffo, *The Concept of Ubuntu as a Cohesive Moral Value* (Ubuntu School of Philosophy, 1994), 38.

<sup>40</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (Doubleday, 1999).

<sup>41</sup> Metz, 538.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

by transcending the 'I' thinking to the 'We' mentality. Conversely, for people to fail to show solidarity does not end with them thinking of themselves as an 'I' but also aiming to undermine one another's ends.<sup>43</sup> Solidarity involves the exhibition of mutual support. To show solidarity, people must act in ways that are reasonably expected to benefit one another. Solidarity is also a matter of people's attitude, such as emotions and motives, being positively oriented towards others.<sup>44</sup> Sympathy, help, and compassion are at the heart of solidarity. On the contrary, for people to fail to show solidarity would mean for them to show a lack of interest in one another's well-being and progress.

At the conceptual level, identity and solidarity are two separate items. That is to say that one can do without the other. An individual could show identity without necessarily exhibiting solidarity. Also, one could exhibit solidarity without identity. For example, when you render help to someone anonymously. However, identity and solidarity are not logically distinct in African thought or philosophy. A communal relationship with others, of the sort that confers *Ubuntu* on one, is well construed as the combination of identity and solidarity.<sup>45</sup> Morally, they ought to be actualized together and not separately. Writing on this, Munyaka and Motlhabi affirm that seeking out community with others means that individuals consider themselves integral parts of the whole community. A person is socialised to think of himself or herself as inextricably bound to others. *Ubuntu* ethics can be termed anti-egoistic as it discourages people from seeking their own good without regard for, or to the detriment of, others and the community.<sup>46</sup> *Ubuntu* promotes the spirit of helping and living for others but discourages egoism.

### c. Community as an extension of the individual

The idea of *Ubuntu* ethics also embraces the notion of community as an extension of the individual. At the heart of this social engineering is the pursuit of social cohesion, which is based on caring for oneself and others. It means the active participation of the individual in the community for self-awareness and other people's realization. It is a two-pronged approach: the self and the community, and never just the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Mluleki Munyaka and Mokgethi Motlhabi, "Ubuntu and its Socio-Moral Significance," in *African Ethics: An Anthropology of Comparative and Applied Ethics*, ed. Munyaaradzi Felix Murove, 63-84 (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), 71-72.

self. The community is seen and understood as an extension of the individual. This could easily be understood within the context of cause and effects; that is, whatever is done by an individual in the community affects everybody in the community.

This way of thinking is communitarian in nature. It is not an individual against community but an individual *a la* (with) community. It is pro-community rather than against community.<sup>47</sup> This mindset breeds a feeling and sense of brotherhood hinged on care and solidarity. This is clearly expressed during times of grief, pain, or, for example, death. During such periods, neighbours usually gather and spend hours, sometimes days, consoling the bereaved family. Explaining this phenomenon vividly, Murove observes that in traditional African ethics, a patient would not see the doctor alone. He would usually be accompanied by his or her relatives and neighbours.<sup>48</sup> The company of relatives and neighbours helps to provide the support needed, counselling, interpretation, and understanding of both the diagnosis and prognosis.<sup>49</sup> The individual is never seen as an isolated being but as a social being. Highlighting this value of *Ubuntu* as expressed by the Shona people of Zimbabwe in their greeting, Nussbaum writes, “Good morning; did you sleep well?” The answer is always: *Ndarara, kan a mara rawo*, meaning I slept well if you slept well.<sup>50</sup> Further, where a European man only inquires after the health of someone he meets, the African wishes to know, even from a total stranger, whether his family members are well. It is not just a question of “how are you?” but “how are your people?” that matters when it comes to health.<sup>51</sup> In sum, the community is an extension of the individual because he or she exists corporately.

### iii. Instruments for living together (social cohesion)

#### a. Dialogue

Dialogue is an African value and one of the key principles of *Ubuntu*. Man is a relational being, and to realize his humanity is to recognize and affirm the humanity of others. This means to respect and recog-

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<sup>47</sup> Leonard T. Chuwa, “Interpreting the Culture of Ubuntu: The Contribution of a Representative Indigenous African Ethics to Global Bioethics” (PhD diss., Duquesne University, 2012), 96.

<sup>48</sup> Munyaradzi Felix Murove, “An African Commitment to Ecological Conservation: The Shona Concepts of Ukama and Ubuntu,” *Mankind Quarterly* 45, no 2 (2004): 198-209.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Barbara Nussbaum, “Ubuntu: Reflections of a South African on Our Common Humanity,” *Reflections of the SoL Journal* 4, no. 4 (2003): 24.

<sup>51</sup> Chuwa, 50.

nize the particularity, individuality, and historicity of others within a relational context. In this sense, true *Ubuntu* incorporates dialogue, i.e., it incorporates both relation and distance.<sup>52</sup> Ontologically, man is by nature a relational being and, consequently, a dialogical being. Dialogue refers to a focused conversation engaged in intentionally with the goal of increasing understanding, addressing problems, and questioning thoughts and actions. It engages the heart as well as the mind. It is different from ordinary everyday conversation in that dialogue has a focus and a purpose. Unlike debate or even discussion, dialogue is intertwined with the relationships between the people involved.<sup>53</sup>

As a relational philosophy, *Ubuntu* pushes for dialogue as a tool for settling disputes and issues. This is in recognition of the ontological truth that the non-identical other is important in society and in the realization of my humanity. An *Ubuntu* perception of the other is dialogical and, at the same time, open-ended. To put it more succinctly, dialogue allows human beings to appreciate and acknowledge the interests and perspectives of others in an atmosphere of mutual understanding aimed at peaceful co-existence. Understanding, reconciliation, and cooperation are the fundamental principles that lie at the core of dialogue, making it an essential value of *Ubuntu*.

## b. Justice

Justice within the purview of *Ubuntu* ethics is essentially restorative. Primarily, the aim of justice here is the restoration of peace and order in the community and the stamping of human dignity. This type of justice is based on the idea that the human community is organic in nature. It is likened to an organism. In an organism, all parts are connected, and what affects one part affects the other parts. Analogically, if one person is hurt in the community, the rest of the members are hurt too. An evil done to one is an evil to all, not just the victim of that evil or violence, as the case may be. In a dispute, there is no clear distinction between conflict resolution and the execution of justice. The resolution process aims at mutual education, community education, character formation, and consensus-seeking.<sup>54</sup> Justice in this light aims at developing the individual and building the community cord so as to ensure peace and progress. The objective of seeking justice is the resto-

<sup>52</sup> Dirk J. Louw, "Ubuntu and the Challenges of Multiculturalism in Post Apartheid South Africa," *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy* 15, no. 1-2 (2001): 26.

<sup>53</sup> Patricia Romney, "The Art of Dialogue," *Animating Democracy* 71, no. 1 (2005): 2.

<sup>54</sup> Chuwa, 52.

ration of peace and order. Hence, when an issue is brought to the fore, dialogue is triggered until a compromise is found and all in the discussion agree with the outcome. Dialogue and consensus are two values that are needed to arrive at an outcome. *Ubuntu* justice is restorative because it is summed up in Tutu's maxim: I am human because I belong. My humanity is caught up and inextricably bound up in yours.<sup>55</sup> The primary aim of criminal justice in *Ubuntu* is reconciliation for all involved, not retribution.

Another important aspect of *Ubuntu* justice is that it is communalistic in nature. Accordingly, an action is right insofar as it positively relates to others and thereby realizes oneself; an act is wrong to the extent that it does not perfect one's valuable nature as a social being.<sup>56</sup> This clearly depicts the communal nature of *Ubuntu* justice. *Ubuntu* justice is "other-prioritized" and not individualistic. A just action is one that brings about personal realization. But this realization must happen within the ambit of the community, and it is done for two reasons: for the self and for others. Benhabib states that individuation does not precede association; rather, it is the kind of association that we inhabit that defines the kinds of individuals we become.<sup>57</sup> It therefore means that community precedes the individual, and the individual needs the community for self-realization. Without the community, individual self-realization is not complete and cannot be complete. Summing this up, Metz opines that an action is wrong insofar as it fails to honor relationships in which people share a way of life and care for one another's quality of life, and especially to the extent that it esteems division and ill-will.<sup>58</sup> This notion of *Ubuntu* is different from the Western conception, which focuses on individual rights and freedoms.

#### VIII. Tension among diversity, communitarianism and human freedom

As a philosophy, *Ubuntu* is fundamentally a pursuit of unity, and at the same time, diversity is an important aspect of it. It is the recognition of human diversity that necessitates the quest for unity. Recall that one of the essential attributes of *Ubuntu* is interconnectedness, meaning that no individual can survive or live a meaningful life without the sup-

<sup>55</sup> Birute Regine, "Ubuntu: A Path to Cooperation," *Interbeing* 3, no. 2 (2009): 17.

<sup>56</sup> Thaddeus Metz, "Toward an African Moral Theory," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 15, no. 3 (2007): 331.

<sup>57</sup> Benhabib Seyla, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Routledge, 1997), 73.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

port and help of others in the community. At the level of community relations, no community can survive in the cosmos in isolation. Human societies and humanity in general exist based on human relationships and solidarity. That is to say that *Ubuntu* communitarian ethics is based on the indebtedness of any particular individual, both to the current community and to his ancestors, who are responsible for who any particular individual becomes.<sup>59</sup> The above description of *Ubuntu* reveals tension between individual freedom and autonomy and its communitarian nature, which is necessary for individual existence. The *Ubuntu* worldview defines the individual within the context of the community. It is the community that defines the individual, and as such, the community takes primacy over individual freedom.

The tension generated between individual autonomy and *Ubuntu* communitarianism throws up a problem of identity. Hence, Taylor is of the view that an individual's identity is not defined in solitude but rather is partly overt, partly internalized, with others. Self-identity, therefore, cannot be independent of others or society.<sup>60</sup> In the making of an individual, physical birth is not enough. The individual must be integrated into society through rites of incorporation, which are occasioned through his vital involvement in the community and with others. One thing that is clear from the above is that *Ubuntu* encourages diversity, provided that such diversity doesn't threaten communal existence. When the tolerated diversity becomes a threat to the cooperative existence of the community, the community, through its instrumentalities and established mechanisms, steps in to restore order. Communal existence becomes the standard of morality.

On the aspect of human freedom, one cannot extricate the individual from his or her social environment without harming the very foundations of his or her freedom or undermining the very social surroundings where he or she belongs.<sup>61</sup> This simply means that morality entails human freedom, while human freedom is restricted by the community to which an individual belongs. Therefore, the concept of freedom in *Ubuntu* is relative and determined by the community. It is a "situated" type of freedom as opposed to autonomy, choice, or self-determination.

Freedom in *Ubuntu* is different from the western conception of freedom. In *Ubuntu*, there is no human freedom outside of the commu-

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<sup>59</sup> Chuwa, 242.

<sup>60</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 243.

<sup>61</sup> Isaias Ezekiel Chachin, *Community, Justice, and Freedom: Liberalism, Communitarianism, and African Contributions to Political Ethics* (Uppsala Universitet, 2008), 258.

nity. The logic of freedom in *Ubuntu* is: if “to be” means to “belong,” then to be “free” is to “relate” with other members of the community. Freedom outside of human relationships is absurd and not welcomed. Writing on freedom, Tempels affirms that freedom can be justified only when it expresses itself through fellowship, and free society must be so organized as to make this effectual’ in other words, it must be rich in sectional groupings or fellowships within the harmony of the whole.<sup>62</sup>

### IX. *Ubuntu* and its global prospects

A crucial question arises: can *Ubuntu* address global issues such as threats to peace, security and justice? *Ubuntu’s* humanistic principles – interconnectedness, compassion, tolerance, and the pursuit of the common good hold significant potential for addressing the moral challenge of globalization.

Globalization, broadly defined, is a process by which the different parts, peoples, and countries of the world are interconnected and interdependent on each other. Globalization is a practical and philosophical concept of economic integration, information and communication highways, justice and fairness for mankind under the auspices of the United Nations, and the concept of man as an end in himself.<sup>63</sup> It has to do with the free flow of people, goods, finance, and information among the countries of the world. This concept is significant for the knowledge of *Ubuntu* because of the prevailing reality of injustice, inequality, exploitation, violence, extremism, and intolerance in the world. These issues clearly negate the positive manifestation of globalization. Hence, in concrete terms, globalization can be unfair due to power tussles and hegemony, class distinctions, trade and financial imbalances, and social justice deficits across the world.<sup>64</sup> The push for globalization, laced with capitalism and individualism, has greatly affected cultures, thereby creating conflicting ideologies and identities.

The application of globalization has become problematic, given the negative features associated with it. In other words, there is a scarcity of the required mindset for its implementation globally, thus leading to difficulties in effectively applying it. Instead of acting as a unifying factor and as the basis of our common humanity, globalization seems to be dividing the world and raising issues of justice, fairness,

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<sup>62</sup> Chuwa, 260.

<sup>63</sup> Maduabuchi Dukor, “Globalization and Social Change,” *ESSENCE: Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 5 (2008): 16.

<sup>64</sup> Ujomudike, 10.

and insecurity. *Ubuntu* offers an alternative moral vision. In this light, the philosophy of *Ubuntu* comes into play to identify and establish the values necessary for human relations and interaction in the world. Put simply, by emphasizing the intrinsic dignity of every human being and the necessity of harmonious relationships, *Ubuntu* could provide the ethical framework needed to guide global interactions. One way *Ubuntu* can lend itself to reforming the global order or human behavior at the international level is to transpose the localized values of tolerance, human dignity, consensus, respect for others, compassion, and the pursuit of the common good to the activities of nations within the international system.<sup>65</sup> This involves the application of the humanistic and normative values inherent in *Ubuntu* to the global community of human relations. *Ubuntu* defines and focuses on human beings as social beings capable of peaceful co-existence and interactions based on common humanity. If nations approached global relations through the lens of *Ubuntu*, international policies would prioritize cooperation over competition, peace building over aggression, and human flourishing over profit. In this sense, *Ubuntu* is not merely a local African ethic but a global moral resource. It can serve as a corrective to the alienation and moral deficits of contemporary globalization, inspiring a vision of humanity rooted in solidarity and shared pursuit of the common good.

## X. Conclusion

In sum, *Ubuntu* synthesizes freedom, diversity, and communalism into a unified moral narrative that emphasizes both individual and collective well-being. Tangwa perfectly captures this integration when he opined that African cultures are characterized by diversity and, left to themselves, united in their tolerance and liberation, live and let live attitude, non-aggressivity, non-proselytizing character, and their accommodation of the most varied diversities and peaceful cohabitation of the most apparently contradictory elements. This unity in diversity reflects the core spirit of *Ubuntu*.

Conclusively, Africa has something very important to contribute to the world in the face of the prevailing dominant social paradigm of exploitation, oppression, hatred, division, religious conflicts, terrorism, and intolerance at the local and international levels. *Ubuntu's* emphasis on justice, dialogue, and communal interdependence provides a moral compass not only for Africa but for the global community. Future scholarship should explore *Ubuntu's* potential in emerging fields such as digital

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 11.

ethics, environmental justice, and global governance where its relational values could offer innovative solutions to contemporary challenges.

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