UBUNTU, *UMUNTU* AND *UBUNTU*: A RESPONSE TO MATOLINO AND KWINDINGWI

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Abstract

The paper proffers a response to Bernard Matolino's and Wenceslaus Kwindingwi's rejection of UBUNTU. To do so, the paper does three things. First, it clarifies important concepts of Ubuntu ethics. That is, it distinguishes among the concepts of Ubuntu (African philosophy), *ubuntu* (virtue or excellence) and *umuntu* (a human being and the value of human dignity associated with her/him). Second, it proffers a defense of Ubuntu ethics, which it [Ubuntu ethics] will construe as a perfectionist moral theory that requires the agent to perfect herself/himself by developing *ubuntu* (the final good). Finally, the paper provides reasons why we should not call for the end of Ubuntu ethics by suggesting how it (Ubuntu ethics) has conceptual, moral and political resources – such as human dignity and *ubuntu* – to construct a robust polity.

Keywords: Human dignity, Ubuntu ethics, Humaneness, *Ubuntu*, *Umuntu*.

Introduction

In the now-famous paper "The End of Ubuntu", Matolino and Kwindingwi propose that we should reject UBUNTU altogether[1]. They provide several reasons. UBUNTU surely is not the only value or worldview that was part of pre-colonial Africa. For UBUNTU to succeed, it requires a particular social context, a small and undifferentiated community, which no longer exists (the idea seems to be that UBUNTU is not suitable for complex, multi-cultural and urbanized secular societies). The essence of their argument is that UBUNTU would continue to fail us precisely because it fails to fit our current situation. It is like someone insisting on using their old clothes, which no longer fit because s/he does not want to accept that her/his body has changed. The clothes may be beautiful, but they no longer fit or are no longer suitable for modern circumstances. Matolino and Kwindingwi urge us to note two further crucial considerations. Narratives of return in Africa – such as African socialism – have all failed, and if we are looking for a genuine moral-political solution, then we need to look beyond Ubuntu. Moreover, they urge us to appreciate the new world that we live in, the challenges and opportunities that come with it and respond accordingly. We need new concepts that will help us negotiate and navigate our place and future in the post-colonial context (Ubuntu is no longer present and it is not suitable for us in the post-colonial situation).

In this paper, we provide reasons for negating the claim that Ubuntu is no longer suitable for modern societies. Specifically, we contest the claim that UBUNTU as an "*ethical solution lacks both the capacity and context to be an ethical inspiration or code of ethics in the present context*" (MATOLINO & KWINDINGWI 2013, 198). We provide two reasons to reject the call for the end of UBUNTU. First, we draw a distinction between Ubuntu and *ubuntu*, and we further proceed to seek clarity regarding which of the two should come to an end. In relation to the former (Ubuntu), we argue that it refers to a worldview or a moral theory, and it is quite suspicious/bizarre to call for an end of

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[1] We use the entirely capitalized UBUNTU to distinguish it from a partiality capitalized Ubuntu and a non-capitalized *ubuntu* expressions of it. The entirely capitalized UBUNTU refers to the general idea as it appears in the literature. We use the partially capitalized (Ubuntu) and the non-capitalized (ubuntu) to represent our own interpretation of it.

a worldview or moral philosophy. In relation to the latter (*ubuntu*), we suggest that there are two ways we can talk of their end. Neither of these ways seems to come close to the radical idea Matolino and Kwindingwi have in mind of altogether jettisoning *ubuntu*. Second, we draw a distinction between *umuntu* and *ubuntu*, and we argue that an argument that calls for the end of Ubuntu is problematic because it fails to recognize the primacy and intrinsic value associated with *umuntu*. A moral agent, as *umuntu*, may fail to attain *ubuntu* (virtue or moral excellence). *Umuntu*, however, retains her/his intrinsic value that is not affected by their moral floundering. Moreover, the values/virtues associated with *ubuntu* (like kindness) are transcultural, and it appears strange to call for their end. The aim of the paper is to demonstrate that Ubuntu has the conceptual, moral, and political resources to regulate our personal and collective lives, it is another thing altogether whether we will follow its prescriptions.

We are aware that there are some literature that have attempted to reject Matolino's and Kwindingwi's call for the end of Ubuntu (see METZ 2014, CHIMAKONAM 2016, KOENANE & OLUNTANJI 2017). This article is distinctive in that it defends the relevance of Ubuntu by clarifying important concepts in Ubuntu ethics, such as the distinction between Ubuntu and *ubuntu* and the distinction between *umuntu* and *ubuntu*. The underlying idea is that if we are clear regarding how we construe Ubuntu ethics, its crucial components and values, such as *umuntu* and *ubuntu*, it may help us to clarify the criticism against it and it may further dismantle its (the criticism) potency. The underlying question is whether the values associated with Ubuntu ethics, human dignity and human excellence (*ubuntu*), can be useful in modern contexts.

In pursuing the defense of Ubuntu ethics, we urge the reader to take the following considerations into account. First, we stipulate a secular rather than religious interpretation of Ubuntu ethics (see GYEKYE 2010, MOLEFE 2015). That is, we will stipulate an interpretation of Ubuntu that grounds it on some natural property. Furthermore, we will construct an interpretation of Ubuntu that pivots on a naturalist interpretation of the value of human dignity and human excellence (ubuntu). Second, we are aware that there are as many interpretations of Ubuntu as there are theorists of it (METZ 2007, GADE 2011, PRAEG 2014, MOLEFE 2019). One may even be tempted to classify Ubuntu under those concepts that are described as essentially

contested notions, which denotes that there is no agreement over their core meaning (GALLIE 1994). To construe Ubuntu as an essentially contested notion denotes that there is no consensus over its core meaning in the literature, where other scholars interpret it in terms of welfare (WIREDU 1992, OKEJA 2013), others in terms of vitality/life (TEMPELS 1959, BUJO 2001), others in terms of certain communal relations (TUTU 1999, PARIS 2005), among others.

To respond to Matolino's and Kwindingwi's rejection of Ubuntu ethics, we stipulate a perfectionist interpretation of Ubuntu ethics, which posits human dignity and human excellence (*ubuntu*) as cardinal values. We are not aware of a perfectionist response to Matolino's and Kwindingwi's rejection of Ubuntu ethics, and that is what makes our response unique. Space will not permit us to defend the plausibility of a perfectionist interpretation, but we believe this interpretation will be heuristically powerful to facilitate a meaningful defense of Ubuntu ethics. Finally, it is important to be clear regarding what exactly we are defending. In this paper, we are defending the suitability of Ubuntu as an axiological perspective that can still be useful in the academy and can still offer us moral and political insights regarding how to regulate human life at the micro- and macro-ethical levels, even in a secular, modern, democratic and multi-cultural context.

The paper will proceed as follows. The first section draws a distinction among three concepts that are crucial in Ubuntu ethics, namely: Ubuntu, *ubuntu* and *umuntu*. The second section provides a sketch of Ubuntu as a perfectionist moral theory. The third section considers the question concerning the target of the criticism that calls for the end of UBUNTU in the context where one takes seriously the distinction between Ubuntu and *ubuntu*. The final section considers the legitimacy of the criticism in the context of the distinction between *umuntu* and *ubuntu*.

Below, we begin by distinguishing at least three concepts that are crucial in Ubuntu ethics.

Ubuntu, *Ubuntu*, *Umuntu*

Any meaningful philosophical engagement requires conceptual clarity (GYEKYE 1997). That is, we need to be clear regarding the use, definition and interpretation of important concepts in our philosophizing. As an entry to Ubuntu, scholars and cultural insiders associate it with the saying, 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' (Nguni

languages), or 'motho ke motho ka batho' (Sotho languages), or 'a person is a person through other persons' (see GADE 2011). We explain Ubuntu in terms of the saying 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu'. The question remains, however, what is Ubuntu that we explain in terms of the saying 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu'. We will begin by distinguishing the difference between Ubuntu (with a capital U) and ubuntu (with a non-capital u). Leonhard Praeg (2014) offers an interesting distinction between the capitalized and the non-capitalized expressions of UBUNTU.[2]

Ubuntu and ubuntu
We could construe Praeg to be suggesting that there is a strict trichotomy among the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods in conceptualizing African experiences. The suggestion is that we can locate the capitalized Ubuntu in the pre-colonial period, and we should locate the non-capitalized ubuntu in the post-colonial period. Praeg's analysis imagines a complete disjuncture between the two periods, one that he characterizes in terms of Ubuntu and the other in terms of ubuntu. He explains the disjuncture in terms of the political work associated with colonization, what Vincent Mudimbe (1981, 3) refers to as the "colonizing structure" or what Mogobe Ramose (2009, 312) refers to as "epistemicide", which involves "the destruction of entire systems of knowledge" (KAPATIKA 2022, 4). Praeg's view is that Ubuntu, as an axiological and cultural resource, has been completely obliterated because of epistemicide. Due to epistemicide, we no longer have access to Ubuntu and we will never have access to it because it is buried under the debris of forgotten/obliterated history.

In his view, we only have the non-capitalized ubuntu. He construes ubuntu in terms of a *glocal phenomenon*, which he understands to involve attempts to interpret a local concept/value in light of foreign (or, global) epistemic and axiological frames like Christianity, human rights, communitarianism and so on. Praeg's main point, in his distinction between Ubuntu and ubuntu, is that we will never know the true substance and essence of (precolonial) Ubuntu given that it has been erased. Indeed, the connection to the precolonial

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[2] We use the entirely capitalized expression of UBUNTU to indicate instances where it is not obvious what sense of it is intended, the broad or narrow one. Ubuntu refers to a broad sense and the ubuntu is a narrow one.

oral archive of Ubuntu has been severed, and we only have the post-colonial written archive of ubuntu. This written archive of ubuntu is dictated by various political, ideological, and institutional agendas informing the different actors and intellectuals that invoke it. Desmond Tutu, given his positionality as a Bishop in the Christian context, associates Ubuntu with the Christian value of *agape*, whereas Metz, given his extensive training in analytic philosophy, interprets it with the tool of Western *analytical techniques of philosophy*, and Praeg interprets it in terms of the French philosophical school of *critical humanism*.

In sum, in Praeg's view, Ubuntu represents the erased philosophy of the African people. He understands ubuntu to refer to current attempts by politicians, movements and intellectuals in and outside of academia to make sense of the Ubuntu, which we no longer have access to. Indeed, all we have are contesting interpretations of Ubuntu that different theorists interpret in terms of competing foreign epistemic frames. For example, we have Ubuntu understood in terms of a Thomist rendition (SHUTTE 1993, 2001); we have it construed in terms of Christian values (TUTU 1999), we have it understood in terms of the analytic tradition (METZ 2007), and so on.

I consider Praeg's skepticism, in relation to the capitalized Ubuntu, to be exaggerated. We consider Christian Gade's (2011) work to offer a useful way to explain the distinction between Ubuntu and *ubuntu*. In his analysis, Gade (2011) observes changes in how the idea of Ubuntu is used in the written literature. The earliest written records on Ubuntu emerge in the mid-1800s. The first major observation he makes is that during this period, reference to Ubuntu associated it with a character disposition, a trait, a virtue, or moral excellence, which was usually described in terms of humaneness. In this sense, Ubuntu refers to a property of a moral agent, one who is virtuous or humane in her/his disposition. The second major observation he indicates is that in the 1990s the term was now associated with a worldview, a cosmology or philosophy.

We consider this distinction between Ubuntu as a worldview/cosmology/philosophy and Ubuntu as a character disposition/virtue/excellence/being humane to be a useful and powerful one. We associate the capitalized Ubuntu with the former and the non-capitalized *ubuntu* with a character disposition of the moral agent, or a

virtuous person[3]. Ubuntu refers to a worldview, or, more accurately, an African philosophy (RAMOSE 1999, DLADLA 2017). Ubuntu as an African philosophical system has its own metaphysical, epistemological and axiological systems. The focus of this paper will be on axiology, Ubuntu ethics, or simply Ubuntu.

We use Ubuntu/Ubuntu ethics to refer to an African moral philosophy and we use *ubuntu* to refer to virtue. Ubuntu is a property of African cultures and *ubuntu* is a property of the moral agent (or, a person). The relationship between Ubuntu ethics and *ubuntu* is that the former prescribes the latter as the final good, i.e., Ubuntu requires moral agents to pursue and acquire *ubuntu*.

Umuntu and ubuntu

Remember, Ubuntu ethics is captured by the saying '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*'. In what follows, we want to clarify the distinction between *umuntu* (a person) and *ubuntu*. The word that stands out in the saying of Ubuntu is that of *umuntu* or a person (in English). The word occurs or is repeated three times[4]. The repetition of the word *umuntu* suggests that one cannot properly understand Ubuntu without understanding its use and meaning (GADE 2011 MOLEFE 2019). To understand the saying, a person is a person through other persons, we propose that we segment it into three components, which components pivot around the word person. The first component, (1) a *person*; the second component; (2) is a *person*; and the final component, (3) through other *persons*.

The first component brings to our attention the fact of being human, *umuntu*. The underlying idea seems to be that one cannot understand Ubuntu without appreciating the fact of being human as primary or foundational in it, and so *umuntu* is at the heart of African moral thought. The claim that *umuntu* is at the heart of African ethics is ambiguous, and it could both be a meta-ethical claim about the nature of moral properties – the source of morality; and/or, it could be a claim about which value is foundational in morality. In Ubuntu ethics, at least

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[3] To distinguish our use of the lower-case with regard to the word ubuntu from Praeg's, which refers to a global phenomenon, we will italicize ours. Whereas he refers to a particular approach and view of Ubuntu ethics, ours refers strictly to a virtue or excellence associated with the moral agent.

[4] In English, the word is repeated three times, the last instance is in a plural form. The same goes for Zulu and Sotho renditions, the Zulu word '-bantu' and the Sotho word 'batho' denote plurality.

in our interpretation of the saying 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu', the concept of *umuntu* covers both domains. On the one hand, the word *umuntu* embodies a meta-ethical claim about the nature of moral properties, where it promises a version of ethical humanism (GYEKYE 1992). On the other hand, the concept *umuntu* specifies the foundational value in Ubuntu ethics.

We interpret the concept of *umuntu* to embody the claim that morality is entirely definable in physical terms. That is, Ubuntu ethics should be understood in natural terms or as a secular morality, which invokes some natural or social feature of our human nature as the basis for morality. Moreover, the concept of *umuntu* also represents a being of value. Note that reference to the concept of a person can be ambiguous, it could refer to the ontological or normative senses of it (WIREDU 1996, IKUENOBE 2016). The ontological notion points us to the fact of being human and the normative notion points us to the moral agent that has lived up to the standards of excellence. The word *umuntu* could be a reference to either the ontological or the normative senses of it. To run ahead of myself, the normative notion of *umuntu* is the same as the idea of *ubuntu*, which identifies a moral agent characterized by excellence or virtue.

The close analysis of the ontological notion of *umuntu* also indicates another under-explored normative notion associated with it. Note the distinction between the fact of being *umuntu* (a human being) and the value associated with the fact of being a human being (the value of human dignity). The progression of thought is that the moment we recognize the fact that some entity is a human a being, an ontological fact; immediately, we tend to associate such a being with intrinsic value, which value we capture in terms of human dignity. Notice this comment by Stephen Bantu Biko (1979, 42, emphasis ours), "[w]e believe in the *inherent* goodness of man. We enjoy him for himself". The word 'inherent' is synonymous with the word 'intrinsic', they point us to the location of the value in question, in this instance, the goodness under consideration is innate or an endowment of our human nature, which description (inherent goodness of man) denotes the idea of human dignity (KORSGAARD 1983, HUGHES 2011). Hence, Ramose's (2009, 420) remark that "the individual human being [umuntu] is an object of *intrinsic value*" and Munyaka's and Motlhabi's (2009, 67) comment "It is in the concept of Ubuntu that the person [umuntu] is

recognized as of the highest and intrinsic value", should not come as a surprise.

Hence, we can conclude that *umuntu* is understood as a bearer of intrinsic value, or human dignity. This is the kind of value that s/he has in and of herself/himself. Our brief analysis has helped us to appreciate that *umuntu* captures the ontological and normative facets. Ontologically, *umuntu* refers to the fact of being human and, normatively, it points to the value associated with *umuntu* (human dignity).

Also, there is a connection between *umuntu* and *ubuntu*, which helps us to understand another important normative concept. The saying, 'a person is a person…', the first two components, at least in our view, specify the relation between *umuntu* and *ubuntu*. The first instance of a person has both ontological (fact of being human) and normative (the value associated with being human, human dignity) references. The second instance, "…is a person…", refers to *ubuntu*, the final good that the moral agent, *umuntu*, ought to attain. We begin our moral journey merely as *umuntu* but the goal is to acquire *ubuntu*. In this light, *ubuntu* is the final good. Hence, *umuntu* has the chief responsibility to acquire *ubuntu*. Scholars typically take *ubuntu* to refer to a positive quality of our human nature, which, when properly developed or nurtured, expresses itself via "goodness of nature"/ "moral disposition" (COLENSO 1861, 354), "Virtue" (MCLAREN 1918, 332) and "the characteristic of being truly human" (PAUW 1975, 117). Typically, scholars tend to reduce the acquisition of *ubuntu* to abstract terms like virtue and/or excellence, which they associate with a humane character disposition (RAMOSE 1999, MUROVE 2014, ETIEYIBO 2017).

To acquire *ubuntu* amounts to being humane. Being humane typically refers to a good moral disposition that expresses itself via pro-social attitudes and behaviours such as kindness, generosity, friendliness, tolerance, generosity, compassion, respect, solidarity, empathy, altruism, among others (GYEKYE 1992, TUTU 1999, MOLEFE 2019). We are not born with *ubuntu*, we are born with the capacity for it, and this is what Biko described in terms of 'the inherent goodness of man'. The cultivation of the capacity for virtue amounts to the emergence of *ubuntu*. Hence, when we are born, we come equipped with certain ontological capacities. The development of these endowments of our nature amount to the emergence of *ubuntu*, or a

virtuous disposition. Each moral agent, as *umuntu*, has a duty to develop or nurture their own human nature in order to have *ubuntu*.

Note the distinctions that we have covered so far. We began by identifying the capitalized Ubuntu, which we associated with African moral philosophy. When one refers to Ubuntu, among others, they are referring to an African axiological system associated with African peoples, specifically those associated with the Bantu-speaking peoples, which is predominant in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa (EZE 2005). Secondly, we noted the non-capitalized *ubuntu*, which refers to virtue, a character disposition, typically explained in terms of a humane disposition. A moral agent that succeeds in developing her humanity acquires *ubuntu*. In this light, Ubuntu is a property of a culture, its moral worldview, and *ubuntu* is a property of the moral agent. *Umuntu* refers to a human being. In the first instance, it points us to an ontological class of beings, *homo sapiens*, that are characterized by certain descriptive features such as a body and whatever else is believed to define them. *Umuntu* also embodies the value associated with being human, which they have merely because they are human, hence this value is described as intrinsic or inherent i.e., it is a value that is a function of our nature (as human beings). The value associated *umuntu* for merely being human, human dignity, captures the patient-centered normative notion of a person (*umuntu*). The value associated with *umuntu*, as a moral agent who exudes virtue, *ubuntu*, captures the agent-centered normative concept of a person (*umuntu*).

The above conceptual distinctions will enable us to give the reader a sketch of Ubuntu ethics as a perfectionist moral theory.

Ubuntu Ethics as Moral Perfectionism

Moral perfectionism, at least as we use it in this paper, refers to those accounts of the good that associate it with the development of the essential feature of our human nature (WALL 2012). There is an underlying assumption associated with perfectionist moral theories, which is the assumption that there is an essential component of human nature (METZ 2007). It is the development of this essential component of our nature, which leads to an agent reaching the ideal of perfection (*ubuntu*). The task of a perfectionist theory is to identify this feature. Ubuntu ethics construes human nature, the ontological view of *umuntu*, to have a positive quality that can either grow or deteriorate, which we

construe in terms of the capacity for virtue (MOLEFE 2019, 2022, 2023). Notice this comment about our human nature:

> … human nature is capable of increasing or decreasing almost to a point of total extinction. There are actions or behavioural patterns that are conducive to the enhancement or growth of a person's nature, just as there are those which are destructive of a person's nature. (SEBIDI 1988, 4)

Here, we might want to draw a distinction between the good material of our nature and *ubuntu*. Scholars talk of *ubuntu* in terms of "the most important quality of umuntu" (MUNYAKA & MOTLHABI 2008, 64) or "a positive quality supposedly possessed by a person [umuntu]" (CHINKANDA 1994, 1). In our view, we think a more accurate description will draw a distinction between the basic or essential metaphysical quality of our nature (that can either deteriorate or increase) and *ubuntu* (which is a consequence of the development of the essential quality of our nature). These are two different kinds of qualities, one strictly metaphysical and another, moral. We may describe the metaphysical quality in terms of the potentiality or capacity for *ubuntu* [human dignity] and another quality is the actual pursuit, acquisition and display of *ubuntu*. The relation between the two is that the agent must develop the former to acquire the latter. So, when Sebidi talks of our nature being capable of growth or deterioration, he has this distinction in mind – between the essential feature of our nature and the development of this feature (*ubuntu)*.

Ubuntu ethics is perfectionist in the sense that it prescribes *ubuntu* as the final goal. The acquisition of *ubuntu* refers to the development of the essential component of our nature, which, when successful, amounts to the emergence of *ubuntu*. The acquisition of *ubuntu* is not an event, it is a life-long process. Hence, one can have more or less of it, even none of it, depending on the quality of their actions and conduct over time (MENKITI 1984). The saying, a person is a person through other persons, may be construed to indicate that *umuntu*, as the moral agent (characterized by the essential quality of our humanity), has the duty to develop this capacity and the development of this capacity is tantamount to the acquisition of *ubuntu*. This development of our nature is, in turn, possible within the context of meaningful/positive interactions with others.

With this rough sketch of Ubuntu ethics as a perfectionist moral theory, we can turn to the arguments against Matolino's and Kwindingwi's repudiation of Ubuntu.

Argument 1: Ubuntu and ubuntu

In this section, we consider the question of which between the two distinct senses (Ubuntu and ubuntu), Matolino's and Kwindingwi's criticism is targeting, the capitalized or non-capitalized form? We will consider both options as possible targets of the criticism. The most likely target is the capitalized form of Ubuntu. If the target is the capitalized form of Ubuntu then this has interesting implications. For our purpose, we will note one major implication. Capitalized Ubuntu refers to an African worldview, a cosmology and/or a moral philosophy (MOLEFE 2023). In this paper, we have offered an interpretation of Ubuntu ethics in terms of moral perfectionism. The suggestion that calls for the end of Ubuntu comes across as a strange one. Moral philosophies, or moral theories, have been criticized for one reason or another. It is typical of philosophy, as an intellectual and critical engagement, to identify weaknesses, incoherencies and implausibility associated with philosophies and/or theories.

It is one thing to philosophize and identify that a particular worldview or moral perspective is seriously defective, but it is quite another to call for its end. Consider, for example, that utilitarianism has been subjected to some of the harshest criticisms from deontological approaches and most recently by capabilities approaches (SEN 1979, MacNaughton & Rawling 2006). These scholars have not gone as far as calling for the end of Utilitarianism as a moral perspective. In this light, it makes sense for Matolino and Kwindingwi to identify serious incoherencies with Ubuntu but it strikes us as extreme, unnecessary and unjustified to call for its end. There might be very serious concerns about Ubuntu, but one should not conflate identifying these weaknesses to calling for its end.

The hasty and unjustified call for the end of Ubuntu is complicated by the fact that we have such an expansive, complex and ever-growing archive on Ubuntu, which is drawn from a variety of disciplines. When one calls for its end, what is one actually doing? Is the suggestion that this archive from all these disciplines dealing with this African worldview must be buried and forgotten? We think such a move will be a problematic one. We want to proceed with an academic

attitude that is open to views that we find to be most implausible and also ones we find to be very weak alongside those we may prefer – 'let a thousand flowers bloom' is understood to underscore intellectual diversity. It is this open and democratic approach to the academy that we believe also contributes towards robust and tolerant intellectual cultures that find ways to accommodate divergent and competing ideas or even errant worldviews.

Moreover, we also have political reasons to resist or even reject the call for the end of Ubuntu. The academy has been dominated by worldviews, cosmologies, and theories from the so-called global north. If the criticism urges us to end one of the emerging and influential philosophies in African thought, then we might correctly describe this proposal as a misguided one. It is a fact that it is not possible for a human community to exist without a worldview or a philosophy. Moreover, when African worldviews were disrupted and interfered with by colonization, we cannot be encouraged to end Ubuntu. Instead, we should be urged to intensify our efforts to protect the idea that African people have always had their own philosophical worldviews that can still contribute to world knowledge. It is possible that these systems of knowledge, such as Ubuntu ethics, might be objectionable and limited in many ways, but it strikes us as an exaggeration to consider it to be altogether useless, fit only for the dustbins of history. Even if Ubuntu is misguided in some ways, surely there should be many other ways that it can be heuristically useful to educate us about the wrong ways to theorize about morality and politics in Africa.

It could turn out that the target of the criticism is *ubuntu*. If truly the target is *ubuntu* then the criticism again would be misplaced. Remember, *ubuntu* refers to the final good that is prescribed by Ubuntu ethics. It could be that the final good prescribed by Ubuntu ethics is wrong for one reason or another, it does not follow that we should call for the end of Ubuntu as a moral theory. Amartya Sen (1979) argues successfully that reducing the good to welfare or utility, as does utilitarianism, completely misrepresents the enterprise of morality like any other philosophy might criticize the final good proposed by any other moral theory, but they do not go further to call for the end of the theory as a whole. The call for the end of *ubuntu*, insofar as it conflates the criticism of Ubuntu, as a moral theory, and *ubuntu*, as the final good, is characteristically unphilosophical. Philosophy, as an academic discipline, has a plethora of views, theories or assumptions, some more

promising than others, but philosophers will critically engage each other's ideas and still stop short of calling for the end of a particular conceptual or theoretical worldview. Rather, they will propose what they consider to be a more promising alternative.

Even if Matolino and Kwindingwi are correct that Ubuntu like *ujamaa*, African socialism, among others, is a narrative of return, it does not follow that we should call for its end. It might be true that *ujamma* and African socialism failed but their failure does not sponsor the view that we should call for their end. The fact that they have failed makes them an important part of our intellectual heritage in African thought when we review our philosophies, ideologies, assumptions and theories to navigate our future. As much as these ideologies and approaches may have failed, it does not follow that there is nothing worthwhile that we may learn or even harvest from them as intellectual ideas and ideologies. The same logic applies to *ubuntu*; it may not be a plausible goal to properly capture African ethics, but it does not follow that it does not teach us some important lessons about morality.

The essence of the argument is that in relation to both Ubuntu and *ubuntu*, it is unphilosophical that when an idea is implausible or problematic in certain ways that we call for its end. It is a characteristic *modus operandi* of activists to mobilize for calling for some idea to be cancelled or superseded altogether. Philosophers engage even the most unpromising of ideas for any purpose they may consider fit to advance discourse in philosophy. The call for the end of Ubuntu would make sense if Ubuntu/ubuntu embodies moral and political consequences that degrade or inferiorize other human beings (as in it is xenophobic, racist, tribalist and so on). If it is not accused of such radical moral mistakes, then the call to end it is unjustified or unnecessary.

Also, the objection might be that Ubuntu should be jettisoned in a very specific sense. Matolino and Kwindingwi are specifically calling for the end of Ubuntu when it comes to making it the central moral-political basis for imagining an African future. Yes, we could teach it in the classrooms and write about it in newspapers and academic platforms, but we should not make it a guiding basis for imagining a robust polity. In the next section, we offer a broad response to this objection, where we will provide an analysis of Ubuntu ethics that we believe demonstrates that it does have important conceptual, moral and political resources that justify why we should consider it useful as a guiding moral vision.

Argument 2: Umuntu and ubuntu

To clarify their rejection of UBUNTU, Matolino and Kwindingwi provide this anecdote:

> Bloemfontein CBD CCTV footage that was screened on major television news bulletins captured the driver of the said taxi making a hasty reverse at a set of traffic lights. He diverted his vehicle from the road and darted onto the pavement where he knocked a pedestrian down. He reversed and alighted to check the impact of his unique driving skills. Upon realizing that his vehicle had not exerted discernible damage to the pedestrian, the driver unleashed a powerful kick to the abdomen of the poor pedestrian who was struggling to raise himself to his feet. The effect of the kick seemed to have the desired effect on the mind of the taxi driver. He shoved a female passenger, who had also alighted, probably to save the poor man from further punishment, back into the taxi and took off. Other healthy-looking males standing around this shocking scene appeared either unbothered or too scared to come to the aid of the hapless pedestrian. (MATOLINO & KWINDINGWI 2013, 197)

They proceed to note:

> The Minister of Police appeared on the eNews Channel Africa television station to bemoan the lack of ubuntu in reaction to this incident. Besides the patent criminality and barbarity of the taxi driver, *perhaps equally surprising is the Minister of Police bemoaning the lack of ubuntu in such an incident*. Was the minister justified in not only expressing his sadness at the disappearance of ubuntu in the Bloemfontein CBD, but also in his expectation that there should be a constant exhibit of behaviour and characteristics that are consistent with ubuntu in the Bloemfontein CBD and, by extension, all corners of South Africa*?* (MATOLINO & KWINDINGWI 2013, 197 – 198)

We can note two critical points in relation to Matolino's and Kwindingwi's call for the rejection of Ubuntu ethics. First, we comment

on Matolino's and Kwindingwi's surprise that the minister invokes Ubuntu as a moral yardstick to evaluate the conduct of the taxi driver and society at large. Typically, scholars and practitioners of Ubuntu associated it with humaneness, kindness, compassion and so on. There is nothing controversial or even surprising about invoking a moral perspective that promotes such virtues. In fact, the virtues associated with a humane disposition, *ubuntu*, such as kindness, compassion, and generosity are universal ones. We are not aware of any moral perspective that shuns such virtues in their moral system. In fact, any bystander could revisit the site in Bloemfontein and evaluate it in light of moral virtues such as kindness, love, peace and so on, or bemoan their absence. The point is that there is something troubling about the surprise that Matolino and Kwindingwi have when the minister bemoans the absence of *ubuntu*, fellow-feeling or sympathy when evaluating this situation.

The fact that Ubuntu ethics urges us to have *ubuntu*, or to be humane, which characteristically expresses itself via what we may describe as transcultural values of kindness and so on, suggests that it is not an esoteric moral view. It offers an African perspective of otherwise trans-cultural values. In this sense, the minister was justified to appeal to Ubuntu ethics as much as he might have appealed to the golden rule or even the idea of human rights. In this instance, however, he invoked a moral perspective that is familiar to his largely African audience.

At this point, Matolino and Kwindingwo might retort that the essence of their argument revolves around whether Ubuntu has the socio-political context required for its justified invocation or whether the minister is justified to invoke it when conditions do not quite permit it – the idea that the values associated with Ubuntu require small-scale and undifferentiated societies. There are two possible responses to this line of reasoning. First, we might argue that it is not true that the values associated with Ubuntu ethics thrive only in contexts of small-scale societies. This claim fails both historically and moral-theoretically. The idea that African societies were small-scale societies cannot be backed by historical evidence. For example, the Kingdom of Great Zimbabwe was not a small-scale society. In fact, the history of the civilization of Africa points us to major kingdoms that we know of, such as the Zulu, Ancient Egypt, Yoruba, and many other kingdoms which occupied very large and diversified cultural groups in Africa (see PARKER 2023).

Moral-theoretically, the values we have associated with Ubuntu ethics strike us as those that transcend the size of society. It transcends in the sense that these values can apply in religious or secular contexts, they could apply in small-scale or large-scale societies and so on. The reason for this is that no society that is committed to a stable social existence can do without the values/virtues associated with Ubuntu ethics, such as kindness, tolerance, reconciliation, solidarity, peace, friendliness and so on. Without these values, the very social fabric that makes community living possible and meaningful would collapse and render human existence unfortunate and miserable. In other words, one needs to make an argument that would justify, not merely claim, that the cluster of relational values/virtues is not suitable for large-scale society.

Moreover, if the argument is that conditions do not permit or justify anyone to expect agents to pursue and acquire *ubuntu* then it seems we need to be clear about the target of the criticism. The criticism is not properly focused on Ubuntu and/or *ubuntu* rather the target should be towards the politicians' failure to create the social environment that is conducive to the emergence of *ubuntu*. By the 'social environment' we mean the kinds of social context that is suitable for agents to be able to flourish *a la* the pursuit and acquisition of *ubuntu*. If the conditions are not suitable for the possibility of Ubuntu ethics and its values to thrive then the problem should be located elsewhere. The problem is not Ubuntu/*ubuntu*, as an African moral worldview and the standard of excellence or virtue that it prescribes, rather the problem lies largely on the political actors that have failed to foster a society conducive for the emergence of *ubuntu*. Instead of mobilizing for the end of Ubuntu/*ubuntu*, we should be mobilizing for the creation of the conditions that are conducive to the emergence of *ubuntu*.

Whereas Matolino and Kwindingwi are rightly appalled by the indecent and violent actions of the taxi driver, we should also ask ourselves about the structural conditions that sponsor the kinds of violence usually associated with the taxi industry, be it the owners and/or drivers. We should further consider whether the state has invested sufficient resources to ensure public safety and prosecute those who assault and mete out arbitrary and unjustified violence against citizens. We should be mobilizing to build a state with the capacity to address such structural features of violence in our society. It seems incorrect, however, to remove a moral doctrine that teaches kindness, tolerance, mercy, forgiveness, etc., because the political environment is

not conducive. Rather, it seems the focus should be on mobilizing to reverse or correct the unsuitable social conditions by engaging the state, legislators, policymakers, and social institutions in policing and public order to be robust and ensure the dignity of each citizen is protected.

Second, Ubuntu ethics, as a moral perspective, has moral-theoretical resources that can assist us in evaluating socio-political situations and that can be useful to shape how we imagine our individual and collective lives. Ubuntu ethics embodies two core values, namely, *umuntu* and *ubuntu*. *Umuntu* embodies the value of human dignity and *ubuntu* represents a cluster of pro-social values such as kindness, friendliness, politeness, compassion, empathy, solidarity and so on. Ubuntu, as a moral perspective, urges us to consider these two cardinal values: human dignity and human excellence *(ubuntu)*. The value of human dignity identifies a human being [*umuntu*] as a moral patient and the value of *ubuntu* identifies a human being [*umuntu*] as a moral agent. The idea of human dignity denotes that *umuntu* is morally distinctive and precious i.e., s/he is a being of moral worth (DONNELLY 2015, MOLEFE 2022, MOLEFE & ALLSOBROOK 2023, MOLEFE & MUADE 2023). To have dignity is usually associated with respect i.e., the proper way to relate and respond to a being of dignity is by respecting them. The respect associated with human dignity, briefly and roughly, tracks both negative and positive duties on the part of the moral agent. We have a negative duty not to harm a being of dignity. The duty not to harm a being of dignity is conceptualized in the literature as a quite stringent one (JAWORSKA & TANNENBAUM 2021).

The negative duty specifies that certain ways to relate to human beings are wrong, no matter whether they may have positive consequences for society at large (MCNAUGHTON & RAWLING 2006). The value of human dignity is against the maximizing moral logic often associated with some versions of moral consequentialism – we cannot achieve the good by doing things that undermine human dignity. Human dignity ought to shape the form of our social and political lives by creating conditions where citizens are treated with fairness and equality (ROSEN 2012). The state (and citizens) must foster a society that operates on the moral logic that adheres to the negative duties that recognize the inalienable value of *umuntu* as a bearer of intrinsic value.

When the minister bemoans the loss of *ubuntu*, he is recognizing the violation and degradation of *umuntu*, a being of the highest and

intrinsic value. The violence meted out against the citizen is unjustified and condemnable because it fails to recognize and protect a being of dignity. Every corner of South Africa should bemoan a loss of *ubuntu* when another human being is treated less than their status would demand. Ubuntu, as a moral view, offers us a standard to recognize the importance of *umuntu* as a moral being, and it urges us to require social (interpersonal relations) and political (social institutions) that recognize, affirm and protect her/his dignity. Two important lessons can be gleaned in relation to Ubuntu and *umuntu*.

First, it calls for the recognition and affirmation of *umuntu* as a bearer of intrinsic value, which demands respect from all moral agents. The presence and emergence of *umuntu* impose on us duties of respect, and this respect may be construed to involve protecting or not harming a being of value. Second, the value of dignity associated with *umuntu* is universal and binding in all kinds of social arrangements. In other words, the value of human dignity matters and should be recognized in small-and-large-scale, secular/religious, mono/multi-cultural societies, etc. Ubuntu makes a political call to imagine social institutions that bolster a culture that affirms and protects *umuntu* as a bearer of intrinsic value.

The respect associated with Ubuntu also has a positive dimension. That is, it also promotes duties that involve empowering a being of dignity (JAWORSKA & TANNENBAUM 2021). In other words, it is not enough to merely protect a being of dignity from social and political harms that may degrade them from their high status of dignity. We have duties, all things being equal, to create conditions that will empower a being of dignity to live a dignified life (HUGHES 2011). Scholars of African thought tend to refer to such positive human conditions in terms of the idea of the *common good* (WIREDU 1992, GYEKYE 1992, MOLEFE 2019). The common good is generally understood to include the provision of basic needs that are necessary for the ordinary functioning of a human being (GYEKYE 2004, 2010, MOLEFE 2019). Odera Oruka (1997) conceives of these positive duties that individuals and the state have towards its citizens in terms of the *human minimum*, which involves the provision of humanizing conditions such as public health, subsistence and education that are necessary for the emergence of a robust agent.

If we link Ubuntu ethics with *umuntu*, the way that we do, the call for the end of Ubuntu strikes us as unwarranted and unjustified. This

is the case because Ubuntu ethics has resources to guide our personal and political lives. On the one hand, and in the very first instance, Ubuntu ethics calls on us to recognize the intrinsic value of *umuntu*, in our own person and in the person of other moral patients, and it urges us to protect and empower such beings of dignity. On the other hand, Ubuntu prescribes that we ought to acquire *ubuntu* (i.e., develop a humane disposition characterized by kindness, generosity, love and so on). It is this rich moral perspective that the minister is invoking to evaluate the situation in Bloemfontein. Moreover, instead of Ubuntu being rendered irrelevant because of the social circumstances under which it is invoked, it is even more relevant. Its relevance is informed by the fact that it can offer us important insights that revolve around how we should regard and relate to *umuntu* as the bearer of intrinsic value and the duty *umuntu* has to have the sort of *ubuntu* that can empower other moral patients. Ubuntu's associations with the twin values of human dignity and humaneness promises a moral perspective that can inform our imagination of the kind of social and political arrangements that are suitable for human habitation.

Conclusion

This paper offered a response to Matolino's and Kwindingwi's call for the end of Ubuntu. To achieve this task of defending Ubuntu ethics, the paper began by doing a philosophical analysis of the core concepts of this value system, namely, Ubuntu, *ubuntu* and *umuntu*. It further argued that it is not in the practice of philosophizing to call for the end of ideas or theories, as much as philosophy tends to criticize or evaluate some ideas or theories in terms of their plausibility. It is also misguided to call for the end of Ubuntu as a moral worldview since it also offers an African perspective in a world of knowledge where African perspectives are marginal and often ignored. Furthermore, we argued that Ubuntu has moral resources, human dignity and human excellence, which make it suitable for organizing our individual, interpersonal relations and institutional lives. It calls on us to imagine a social existence characterized by recognizing human dignity and an existence that urges us to aspire towards human excellence in the moral domain (to acquire) and beyond (in the arts and sciences).

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