

## **Environmental Challenges and the Place of African Relational Environmental Ethics of *Unhu/Ubuntu***

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### **Abstract**

Questions on understanding the connections between human beings and the natural environment have generally been addressed extensively. However, more effort still needs to be made to augment such research by considering how to further understand human-environment connections from ethical perspectives. In this work, I consider how the human-environment relationship might be approached differently by appealing to some underexplored relational values of existence that are salient in the African philosophy of *unhu/ubuntu*. I argue why these values of *unhu/ubuntu* ought to be relevant to environmental challenges currently facing the world. After considering some of the implications of the current environmental crisis for the environment and human beings, I will explore what environmental ethical intuitions might be drawn from the African relational ethical view based on *unhu/ubuntu*. In the end, I argue that an appeal to African ethics of *unhu/ubuntu* ought to be taken seriously in terms of its implications for the ontological connectedness, communality, relationality, harmonious and intergenerational co-existence between different beings. Ultimately, I show how ubuntu can function as the basis for an environmental philosophy for Africa and elsewhere as I consider some of the environmental challenges facing the world.

**Keywords:** Environmental Ethics, Relational ethics, *Unhu/ubuntu*, Ecological crisis.

### **Introduction**

The current environmental problems threatening the whole world are characterised by problems such as overpopulation, deforestation, pollution from burning of fossil fuels and problems of waste disposal. These ecological problems are not only ethical problems (MUROVE 2004, 195); they have also reached unprecedented levels to the extent that humanity could be deemed to be facing an environmental crisis (See LE GRANGE 2012, 329). Indeed, some of these environmental problems are quite complex in their nature and effect on both the environment and human well-being. Essentially, these environmental problems should be understood in terms of how they contribute to environmental deterioration, human poverty, diseases and death. It is the reason why scientists are constantly warning that the planet has crossed a series of tipping points that could

have catastrophic consequences such as climate change, global warming and extinction of species.

With the continued impact of human activity on the environment, which was mostly accelerated at the onset of the industrial revolution in the eightieth century, human beings find themselves in the age of the anthropocene characterised by a boom in technological advancements, food production, population growth etc, but all with detrimental effects on climatic patterns and the environment leading us to an environmental crisis. Human beings are thus challenged to reconsider their relationships with different aspects of the environment in order to avert the looming catastrophe. However, one might wonder how such a crisis would eventually be averted. Or, whether the anthropogenic factors that contribute to continued environmental deterioration might possibly be reversed one day. One of the most important questions that I seek to address in this article is: What kind of philosophy might human beings appeal to in order to relate well to the natural environment? In addressing these important questions, I advance African relational environmental ethics of *unhu/ubuntu* in terms of how it might contribute to the current discourse on the environmental crisis and how it might ultimately influence policy-making in Africa and elsewhere considering the current environmental crisis that is affecting the whole world. Although Jerome Mbih Tosam has already shown how African environmental ethics is capable of contributing to discussions on sustainable development, global warming and climate change (TOSAM 2019, 174), I consider that as a continent, we still have limited research on African environmental ethics and philosophy which could be used in influencing policy-making in Africa and elsewhere (KELBESSA 2022a), hence my endeavour to consider the inclusion of *unhu/ubuntu* into environmental policy-making in Africa.

After highlighting the kind of environmental problems facing the world, which are also responsible for other consequential human problems, I use that as a foil to my search for a possible and plausible epistemic paradigm that might help to construct positive and less-anthropocentric conceptions of environmental ethics stemming from conceptions of relationships between different beings. I do so by appealing to African relational environmental ethics. As I show how African relational ethics might function as the basis for environmental philosophy in Africa and elsewhere, I thus defend the African philosophy of *unhu/ubuntu* as capable of instilling different conceptions of harmonious existence among different beings ranging from human beings to non-human animals and the natural environment at large. Although Godfrey Tangwa might not have been specific to the kind of relational ethics based on *unhu/ubuntu*, he alluded to the “recognition and acceptance of independence and peaceful coexistence between earth, plants, animals and humans” (TANGWA 2004, 389). I thus consider that “African environmental philosophy renounces anthropocentrism and promotes a holistic view of the world and life” (KELBESSA 2022a). Ultimately, I show how the African relational ethics of *unhu/ubuntu* feeds into this holistic view of the world and life and how that might be taken in confronting the current environmental challenges.

The article develops as follows: In the first section, I consider the general development of environmental ethics in history of philosophy, i.e., the realisation for ethical consideration of nature as well as how it has been heightened after the

Anthropocene, at least from conceptions in Western philosophy. I then consider some of the characteristic environmental problems emanating from the human-nature relationships, and how such problems essentially affect both the environment and human beings. In the third section, I deal with the nature of African relational ethics showing how it is shaped by the philosophy of *unhu/ubuntu*. I then proceed to the fourth section to demonstrate and argue why such an understanding of relational ethics based on *unhu/ubuntu* might help us construct a plausible account of relational environmental ethics. In the last section, I raise and respond to some objections that are often raised with reference to the African ethics of *unhu/ubuntu* in general.

### **Environmental Philosophy and Environmental Ethics in History**

The relationship between environmental philosophy and environmental ethics cannot be taken for granted. Although there are fundamental differences between the two, environmental philosophy and environmental ethics can sometimes be used interchangeably. However, environmental philosophy generally deals with a broad range of areas that include environmental ethics, environmental metaphysics, environmental epistemology, environmental political theory, environmental aesthetics, environmental humanism, religious humanism.... etc” (KELBESSA 2022b). While environmental philosophy is broader and concerned with all other areas of interest that may not necessarily have ethical dimensions, “environmental ethics is a branch of applied ethics that deals with the ethical relationships between human the natural order of the universe. It is no exaggeration to trace the origin of environmental philosophy to beings and the natural environment” (KELBESSA 2022b). What this implies is that environmental philosophy and environmental ethics are all closely connected to the extent that they all can be traced to as far back as the history of the relationships between human beings and nature.

Several accounts mostly within the Western philosophical tradition, acknowledge that environmental philosophy has a long history dating back to the classical era. However, most of these accounts point to the emergence of environmental ethics in the late twentieth century, especially in the 1970s after the publication of Rachel Carson’s (1963) *Silent Spring*. This classic is viewed as having launched the environmental movement, and consists of essays that drew the world’s attention to the looming environmental crisis that posed a threat to both human and environmental wellbeing. In 1967, Lynn White (Jr) also published one of the most influential and thought-provoking works on environmental philosophy and ethics, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis*. In it, he blames the main strands of the Judeo-Christian heritage as being largely responsible for the overexploitation of nature by human beings, triggering an ecological crisis (WHITE 1967 1205). Most of these twentieth-century and contemporary environmental philosophers suggest that environmental ethics is something new to humanity.

There seem to be many factors influencing the view that environmental ethics is a recent development or at least a new culture in Western philosophy. One of these factors relates to the nature of philosophical questions prior to the industrial revolution, most of which focused on emphasising the centrality of

human reason in understanding the nature of reality. One can also think of the influence of Platonic-Aristotelean thinking, even on medieval thinkers Augustine and Aquinas who also inherited a view of reality that prioritises human beings. After the medieval era, more emphasis was also placed on the sovereignty of human reason, thereby culminating in the Baconian and Cartesian ideas that the human being is at the centre of the universe. This mechanistic and anthropocentric thinking, which Tosam sees as contradicting to the African view towards nature (TOSAM 2019, 174-5), was ushered in by the Industrial Revolution towards the end of the eighteenth century when the detrimental effects on the environment began to be felt on a large scale. As a result, the focus of philosophy shifted to ethical questions again since the effects of the industrial revolution could be felt on a large scale through industrial effluent flowing into the rivers and seas, threatening human beings, aquatic creatures and other animals, air pollution from industries and land degradation. However, this should not be understood to mean that prior to the advent of these environmental problems, human beings did not have a conception of environmental ethics and justice.

The misunderstanding of taking environmental ethics as a new discourse in the history of philosophy is also evident in the bulk of the literature on African environmental philosophy and ethics as well. This is attributable to the current environmental crisis reflected through climate change, the extinction of species, global warming pollution, and heat waves, among other environmental problems. Nevertheless, although the view that the history of environmental ethics could be traced to as far back as the classical or pre-Socratic period in philosophy is essentially true, I must emphasise that traditional and indigenous environmental philosophy and ethics should not be limited to documented Western philosophy alone. It is essentially wrong to think that environmental philosophy is alien to African philosophical traditions that also have a rich history of their own African metaphysical, religious, mythical and aesthetical conceptions of the environment, which helps them to construct different conceptions of their environmental ethics. Kelbessa, for example, notes that several non-Western philosophical traditions, such as Jainism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism and Shintoism show different conceptions of ethical concern with nature (KELBESSA 2022b). In the same vein, I seek to show how African indigenous philosophy might contribute to environmental ethics through *unhu/ubuntu* ethics promoting relational environmental ethics, as I caution against attempts to consider environmental philosophy and ethics as unconnected new in African philosophy.

### **Human-Nature Relationships and Environmental Challenges**

What are environmental problems like, and how do human beings contribute to them? How do they manifest, and what or who do they affect? In this section, I respond to these questions as I consider how the world currently faces enormous environmental challenges. Although some of the environmental problems might be explained naturally as natural environmental disasters like tectonic shifts, volcanoes, earthquakes and windstorms always affect human beings and the environment from time to time across different parts of the world, I focus on those that result from poor relationships between human beings and the environment because most of the environmental problems that are contributing to

environmental degradation and threatening humanity are largely from “anthropocentric activities, individualistic values and capitalism” (AYAYIA 2023, 1). Again, my interventions are mainly informed by ethical considerations of such a relationship and not necessarily the scientific ones, which I lack.

After the scientific and industrial revolutions of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, respectively, both the environment and human beings began to feel the ecological backlash in different ways because the scientific revolution saw drastic improvements in human scientific methods of exploring the empirical world, while the industrial revolution led to different methods of machine manufacturing and industrial production thereby improving human standards of life in general. It is during the scientific revolution, which is mostly influenced by the thinking of Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543), Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) and Isaac Newton (1642-1727), that we see “a marriage between science and technology, a union of the theoretical and the empirical approaches to our natural environment” (WHITE 1967, 1203). Such a union ushered in a dangerously anthropocentric view based on the thinking that the human being occupies the centre of the universe and that his/her scientific knowledge could be used to understand and conquer the environment around through scientific and technological development. Thomas Kuhn looks at the scientific revolution as both a destructive-constructive paradigm owing to the interventions and disruptions from new technologies (KUHN 1962, 66). Indeed, the positive influence of the scientific and industrial revolutions can be felt through improved healthcare, increased production, and improved quality of life owing to the scientific and technological developments. On the other hand, the scientific and industrial revolutions have equally been responsible for environmental deterioration through their contribution to global warming, notwithstanding their positive impact on human life in general. Data released by NASA indicates that “the average temperature on Earth has increased by at least 1.1°C since 1880, with the majority of the warming occurring since 1975, at a rate of roughly 0.15°C to 0.20°C per decade” (NASA, 2023).

In addition to the anthropocentric *licence* that human beings have inherited from the scientific and industrial revolutions, some of these anthropocentric attitudes that characterise human beings are mostly shaped by the nature of their different religions as well as other philosophies of life. Consider that most theistic religions, including African traditional ones accept a teleological hierarchy of existence in which human beings are thought to have been created in God’s image. Because of that assumption, human beings generally assume dominance over all that exists, to the extent that “man shares in great measure, God’s transcendency of nature” (WHITE 1967, 1206). This is the reason why human beings generally think that they can only wrong fellow human beings and not other moral patients, such as non-human animals and the natural environment. I take non-human animals and the natural environment as moral patients because these are beings that do not have ethical reciprocity with human beings, but at least they stand to be harmed by human actions. And human beings ought to have moral obligations towards such defenceless beings.

Again, most of these religions, are also pro-natalist as they support unrestricted procreation or reproductive freedom, which ultimately leads to

population growth. The assumption is that the environment was created for such purposes. It is for this reason that different religions might also be accountable for human overpopulation and problems of affluence, all of which cause some strain on the natural environment as the increasing human populations will likely not be able to cope with the available natural resources, coupled with the effluence that human beings are contributing through waste disposal into water bodies.

Associated with the above views is also the acceptance of patriarchal lifestyles based on recognition of unnecessary division of beings and reality like men/women, and humans/nature. Such dualist mentality is also responsible for the bad human-nature relationships in the world. Karren Warren sums up this view as she argues that, “there are important connections – historical, experiential, symbolic, theoretical – between the domination of women and the domination of nature ...which ought to be taken seriously” (WARREN 1990, 125). An understanding of such connections will show us how patriarchy not only supports the domination of women and children but also the domination of other different aspects of the environment.

Taken together, all these views support the anthropocentric, individualistic and capitalist tendencies stemming from the worldview that “there is a separation between the self and the non-self (phenomenal world) (IKUENOBE 2014, 3). It is for these reasons that the environment and human beings continue to suffer from the kind of problems that they generate. Some of the notable environmental challenges that threaten the world, which stem from the influence of the above views, include but are not limited to diminishing natural resources, reduction and extinction of biodiversity due to human population growth and activity, climate change and global warming. In 2022 for example, the Worldwide Fund for Nature’s Living Planet Report noted a 69% decline in the relative abundance of monitored wildlife populations of mammal, bird, reptile, fish and amphibian species around the world since 1970 (WWF Living Planet Report, 2022).

Environmental problems can also manifest in a variety of ways, and their effects often affect people across the world differently, leading to other important questions about environmental justice. Notwithstanding, environmental problems can also be understood as being responsible for the occurrence of droughts, poverty, diseases, and death in the world due to the effects of climate change, global warming, and poor relationships between human beings and nature. According to NASA, so far scientific evidence “indicates that human activities – particularly emissions of heat-trapping greenhouse gases – are mostly responsible for making our planet warmer” (NASA 2023). One can also think of how global temperature increases, climate change, chemical pollution, air pollution, water pollution and poor sanitation might be taken as responsible for the depletion of the ozone layer and how that is responsible for the increased cases of environmental diseases such as skin cancers and heat strokes all of which are taken as essentially a result of human mistreatment of nature. Also, consider how diseases such as SARS, Ebola and COVID-19 are seen as possibly a result of zoonotic infections from animals to human beings owing to the poor, unhygienic and mishandling of animals in wet markets (See CHEMHURU 2023). All this points to the need for good relationships between human beings and different aspects of the environment.

One can, therefore, argue, and with good reasons, that environmental well-being is pertinent to good human health or public health. Thus, the issue of good relationships between human beings and the natural environment is fundamental to the well-being of both human beings and nature itself. If such a relationship is not properly maintained, then both human beings and the natural environment suffer. It is important to think of ways by which human beings could maintain good relationships with the natural environment. This is why I propose that responses to the environmental crisis should take seriously the connections between human beings and non-human beings. I therefore proceed next, to consider some African indigenous approaches to environmental ethics, which I think are in line with this approach.

### **African Relational Ethics and *Unhu/ubuntu***

Generally, a lot of conceptions on African ethics tend to conflate the two concepts *relationality* and *unhu/ubuntu*. While these concepts are closely related, in so far as *unhu/ubuntu* forms the basis for grounding African relational ethics, they are not one and the same thing as I will try to show in this particular section. So far, a number of philosophers have shown the relational orientation of *unhu/ubuntu*, (see, SAMKANGE and SAMKANGE 1980; RAMOSE 1999; CHIVAURA 2006; MUROVE 2004; 2014), making my task a bit easier as I will make use of these relational conceptions to argue how *unhu/ubuntu* feeds into relational ethics suitable for the current environmental challenges facing Africa and the rest of the world.

Among these philosophers who have tried to examine the origin of the philosophy of *ubuntu* in recent years, Ramose has given one of the most vivid etymological and philosophical analysis of it. According to Ramose, the term *ubuntu* is derived from two conjunctions *-ubu* implying the notion of *be-ing* or existence in general and *-ntu* signifying the nodal point at which *beingness* achieves fullness or concrete form (RAMOSE 1999, 49-50). A similar etymological analysis is also provided by Chivaura who observes that: “the *-nhu* in *hu-nhu* or *-ntu* in *ubu-ntu* refers to one’s physical existence as a *thing* with no values attached. *Hu-* and *ubu-* indicate values. People who lack *hu-* or *ubu-* attached to them are mere *-nhus/-ntus* or *things*. *Havana unhu*, in Shona: they lack human content” (CHIVAURA 2006, 232). When it comes to environmental ethics and environmental challenges, such persons lacking *unhu/ubuntu* essentially lack the kind of relational ethics that would be suitable for them to understand the complex relations between different forms of being.

Although the notion of relationality might not be so explicit from the above etymological conceptions of *ubuntu* by Ramose and Chivaura, the views given also implicitly point to the relational character of human existence in general. The values to which *unhu/ubuntu* is attached to, emanate from a community of human persons with specific relationships and a definite understanding of a human being. Accordingly, Murove argues that, “*ubuntu* means humanness – treating other people with kindness, compassion, respect and care” (MUROVE 2014, 37). Murove draws the notion of *ubuntu* closer to relationships between human beings such that one can understand it as an important aspect of being related to each other. Accordingly, Chivaura concludes that “*hunhu/ubuntu*

is the ability to control overpowering urges in one's physical being" (CHIVAURA 2006, 232). The physical being that Chivaura refers to here should be understood as the person. Through *unhu/ubuntu*, the person ought to safeguard the relationships that one has with other human beings and non-human beings at large. For this reason, it therefore becomes a bit difficult to examine *unhu/ubuntu* without making reference to its relational orientation, which is essential to harmonious existence with different forms of being.

Understood properly, relationality is intrinsic to all beings while *unhu/ubuntu* is relative in that it might either be attained or lost at some point in time. For example, Samkange and Samkange (1980, 38) use the example of how one day, an old man discouraged Samkange from paying money to two youngsters who had helped him to pull his car from a ditch on the basis that they were related. The assumption is that, receiving payment for helping a relative is inconsistent with *unhu/ubuntu* and ultimately lack of respect for *relationships* that exists between individuals. In this case, if the two young men had received payment from Samkange (their father-in-law as echoed by the old man) (SAMKANGE and SAMKANGE 1980, 38), it shows that they lack *unhu/ubuntu*. However, that does not take away the relationships between the families, but it shows a lack of *unhu/ubuntu*. It also shows that, although *unhu/ubuntu* is a cherished ethical trait among human beings, it is not possible that all beings will attain it all the time because some individuals will receive such payment from a relative, while *relationality* is something that cannot be taken away at any point. This explains why, for example, sometimes, if certain individuals do some things that are not consistent with accepted ethical norms, such persons are described as lacking *unhu/ubuntu*, which is key for good relationships. However, they cannot be taken as lacking relationality. Thus, *unhu/ubuntu* remains an important ingredient of *relationality* although it may not always be sufficient.

In African relational ethics, it is not possible that *unhu/ubuntu* might be realised without reference to the relational orientation of humanity with the rest of the world. Rather, relationships take fundamental ontological precedence over *ubuntu*. Murove (2014) makes this point clear that *ubuntu* is made possible by the relational bond among beings. For Murove, "the definition of *ubuntu* as humanness is dovetailed by this presumption – namely that humanness is our existential precondition of our bondedness with others" (MUROVE 2014, 37). What this implies is that humanness is largely an outcome of the relationships among beings. This is clear from the expression that has come to be accepted as the dictum of *ubuntu*, the view that *munhu munhu navanhu* (Shona) / *umuntu ngomuntu ngabantu* (Ndebele/Zulu) (A person is a person through others). What this means is that humanness (*unhu/ubuntu*) is an expression of relationships with others and ultimately with the surrounding environment. In light of these understandings of relationality and *unhu/ubuntu*, I therefore proceed in the next section to show how the relational character of *unhu/ubuntu* might be taken in constructing some positive conceptions of relationships between human beings and the environment.



### **Relational Environmental Ethics Based on *Unhu/ubuntu***

There are different approaches to what might be taken as African indigenous relational environmental ethics. Some African environmental ethicists insist on the interpretation of African traditional beliefs and practices, such as those based on taboos and totems, in terms of how they might be taken as capable of instilling relational environmental ethics based on the supposed relatedness between human beings and non-human beings. Others also appeal to African traditional religious views that are mostly based on beliefs in the influence of superior being/s such as (God/s) and ancestors, and what the implications of such beliefs might be, for the relationships between human beings and nature. Although largely based on metaphysical premises that might be difficult to defend, such an approach to environmental philosophy and ethics, is often taken to confirm a teleological view of existence. In such a view, it is thought that different beings within the teleological hierarchy of existence ranging from God, ancestors, human beings, non-human animals, and physical nature have different teleological roles and ethical obligations towards each other. The same view also emphasises connectedness between such beings where “past, present and future generations are all part of a moral community” (LE GRANGE 2012, 334). Connected with this view, others believe in the sacredness of certain aspects of the environment such that maintaining good relationships with such entities could be the basis for environmental ethics.

However, a seemingly less objectionable view is often based on grounding African environmental ethics on the relational ethics of *unhu/ubuntu*. As I have already shown in the previous section, this view is based on understanding the fundamental relationships between different beings in terms of how such relations ground virtues that are necessary for harmonious living such as humanness, happiness and fulfilment among other positive values that foster togetherness, relationality, interconnectedness among different beings and entities of the environment. Such a view, which is usually referred to as the African relational view of ethics, is largely based on the African communitarian ethics of *unhu/ubuntu*. It has, in recent times, become one of the most dominant views in Africa philosophy and ethics broadly owing to its acceptability in different communities in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Southern Africa. I, therefore, seek to consider its environmental ethical import despite the current environmental challenges threatening the whole world.

The interplay between *unhu/ubuntu*, communitarian ethics and relationality might be difficult to realise and this might have implications for environmental ethics. However, *ubuntu* embodies African relational ethics, which also anchors environmental ethics. For Lesley LeGrange, “*ubuntu* is rather a concrete expression of *ukama* (*relationships*)” (LE GRANGE 2012, 335). As Murove sees it, *ukama* means relatedness while *ubuntu* implies humanness (MUROVE, 2004: 195). From this understanding, one can therefore construct a relational view of environmental ethics based on understanding different relationships among beings. In fact, *unhu/ubuntu* plays an integral role in communitarian and relational living not only among human beings, but the rest of nature. Because of its ontological underpinnings emphasising the centrality of communitarian and relational existence, *unhu/ubuntu* informs humans of how

important existence ought to be understood beyond the individual person or self or even beyond the community of human persons. One of the most fundamental points in understanding *unhu/ubuntu* from communitarian, relational, and environmental ethical perspectives is to realise that the individual person, or persons who fail to realise the significance of communitarian and relational living lack/s *unhu/ubuntu*. This is not only applicable to relationships involving only human communities, but also to human beings and the environment.

Another view is that human beings do not only consider their communitarian existence only to applicable to related persons through blood or family ties. *Unhu/ubuntu* fosters a view of relationships in which all human beings are related, even if they may not be properly related in the strict sense (See SAMKANGE AND SAMKANGE 1980, 35; METZ 2014, 69). This explains why it is unsurprising to see for example, along the road, in public transport or in the market-place, strangers cordially greeting each other. It is because individuals consider themselves to be related to all other human beings. The implications such a view has for environmental ethics are that all human beings naturally become the individual's moral counterparts such that whatever the person does in relation to the environment, they will also think about their related beings (moral counterparts), which point to all human beings. Of course, this view might be understood to be somewhat anthropocentric as the basis for ethical consideration of the environment is indirectly informed by the need to safeguard human interests and relationships first.

Again, one might be tempted to think that the communality and the relationships that are strengthened by *unhu/ubuntu* through the dictum, *munhu, munhu nevanhu / umuntu ngumungu ngabantu* are only at the level of a community of humans at the exclusion of the rest of nature. However, these relations go beyond the human community. This is why for example, *unhu/ubuntu* also ought to be understood as not only informing a communitarian life that is only applicable to human communities, but one that also goes beyond human communities. Consider that in African ethics, a person who relates well with fellow human beings, but does not have a conception of how to relate well with the surrounding environment is also viewed as lacking *unhu/ubuntu*, because it is a quality that should not be taken only with reference to how humans relate with other human beings. One's treatment of non-human animals, or other aspects of the natural environment might effectively determine whether one has or lacks *unhu/ubuntu*.

The African ethics based on *unhu/ubuntu* emphasise the need to respect beings belonging to different levels of existence ranging from spiritual beings, human beings, animals and non-animate reality (IKUENOBE 2014, 2). The communal and relational view of existence with these different levels of existence challenges human beings to always maintain good relationships and to be in harmony with these different aspects of the environment, such as spiritual beings, other human beings, animals and non-animate beings. Harmony between and among these different beings is a key aspect that is reinforced by the philosophy of *unhu/ubuntu* because a conception of what it is to be a good human being can also be derived from how one relates with these different beings. Accordingly, *unhu/ubuntu* fosters an ontological view of the world which is both cosmological

and holistic in outlook such that human beings strive to live in harmony with the rest of nature. In such a holistic view of reality, there ought to be harmony and interconnectedness of all beings ranging from human beings to different aspects of nature, all of which ought to exist in harmony. In such a view, “reality is seen as a composite, unity and harmony of natural forces. Reality is a holistic community of mutually reinforcing natural life forces consisting of human communities (families, villages, nations and humanity), spirits, gods, deities, stones, sand, mountains, rivers, plants and animals” (IKUENOBE 2014, 2). The importance of this understanding of reality is its attempt to close the supposed gap between humanity and nature such that caring for others ultimately involves a duty to care for the natural environment as well (See LE GRANGE 2012, 334).

Intergenerational ethics, involving the ethical obligations to future generations (See ROSER, 2023), is also an important aspect of comprehensive environmental ethics that could also foster environmental sustainability and help to withstand the current and future environmental challenges. While most typical Western ethical theories fail to account for the grounds for intergenerational obligations because of lack of reciprocity and mutual advantages with future generations (ROSER 2023), an ethical theory taking into consideration the needs and interests of future generations becomes useful. *Unhu/ubuntu unhu/ubuntu* should be understood in terms of its strong implications for communality and relationships between beings belonging to different generations. A good human being is, therefore, one who respects past, present and future beings although it is always difficult to conceive proper relationships with the metaphysical world, especially with past generations. Notwithstanding, *unhu/ubuntu* should be understood as informing a sound conception of African intergenerational environmental ethics. The philosophy of *unhu/ubuntu* plays an integral role in instilling such a conception of intergenerational environmental ethics although it is often ignored in the literature. Consider that to be a good human person with *unhu/ubuntu*, who lives well with other related beings is not limited to how human beings live well among themselves within the present generations. *Unhu/ubuntu* is also judged on the basis of how well the person respects others, including future human beings, even if one might not be directly related to them because they are our future communities to which we are related through *unhu/ubuntu*.

An objection that is often raised to this *future communities* conception of intergenerational environmental ethics is whether ethical obligations from present generations are derived from ‘direct’ or ‘indirect’ duties towards future communities? It is difficult for present generations to claim to be related to, and be capable of directly wronging future generations (communities) that are not presently involved or may not even exist at all. For Metz, “the idea of something being the object of a ‘direct’ duty [is when it is] owed a duty in its own right, or the idea of something that can be wronged” (METZ 2019, 11). However, future generations cannot possibly be directly wronged by present generations here and now. Yet, the actions on nature by the present human communities can eventually indirectly affect the welfare of future communities. For this reason, present generations should have ethical obligations towards future generations because they have ‘indirect’ duties to them. Indirect moral duty towards future generations means that current generations of human beings have moral obligations to treat the

environment in a certain way “but not because of facts about it”, but because they are related to the future generations (METZ 2019, 11).

### ***Some Objections and Responses***

There are some objections that are often raised against the appeal to *unhu/ubuntu*, which are also worth acknowledging and perhaps responding to. In this regard, Bernard Matolino and Wenceslaus Kwindigwi (2013) were some of the first to interrogate the applicability of *unhu/ubuntu* in contemporary Africa. Consider the relevance of *unhu/ubuntu* in light of the enormous social, political, economic and environmental crisis that are characteristic of most African countries presently. It is even worse when one thinks about how deep-seated these issues are considering the moral issues related to corruption, Afrophobia, xenophobia that always characterise post-colonial Africa. One might therefore be justified in having second thought about the relevance of *unhu/ubuntu* in present day Africa.

First, it is important to realise that, as an indigenous philosophy of existence, *unhu/ubuntu* is presented by many African political thinkers as one of the major post-colonial projects based on appealing to what Matolino and Kwindigwi call “narratives of return” such as socialism (MATILINO AND KWINDINGWI 2013, 197). Yet for Matolino and Kwindigwi, in Africa, the monolithic presentation of these narratives of return have proved to be not only politically elitist and politically motivated as “ubuntu is only advanced to serve a certain Africanist agenda when it best suits the elite” (MATOLINO AND KWINDINGWI 2013, 202). Thus, *unhu/ubuntu* is seen as one of the narratives of return, which has failed in Africa because of the way it can often be appealed to by elitists, corrupt leaders and dictators alike in safeguarding their selfish interests. However, a plausible response to that objection would be that if society fails to use a certain theory according to its expectations, it does not mean that such a theory is essentially wrong. For Thaddeus Metz, “even if it were shown that some who believe in ubuntu, or who appeal to the word ‘ubuntu’, act wrongly or cause harm as a result of doing so, it would not follow that ubuntu as a theory about how one morally ought to treat others is false or epistemically unjustified” (METZ 2014, 66). Consider that, even if some societies are presently failing to live up to democratic ideals, it does not imply or mean that democracy is not fit for purpose as a system of governance.

Another view is that *unhu/ubuntu* is disconnected from the ethical experiences of contemporary African people who seem to have failed to use these narratives of return both economically and politically in order to transform their lives (MATOLINO AND KWINDINGWI 2013, 198). Essentially, this view is based on the understanding that the existential realities that enabled the flourishing of a culture of *unhu/ubuntu* such a communalistic culture no longer exist owing to industrialisation and modernity in Africa (MATOLINO AND KWINDINGWI 2013, 203). However, one might also argue that modernity has proved to be a false promise for Africa in terms of ethics such that it is prudent to always return to the past. It is not clear how the core values of *unhu/ubuntu* such as relatedness, humanness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion etc could be deemed to be irrelevant even if society is modernised and developed. Indeed, advanced, modernised, and developed societies are the ones that urgently need these value-

systems due to the disruptive effects of various influences, such as technology and AI systems on human social life and the environment at large.

Third, the other reason for which ubuntu is often objected is that it is believed to only work well with “smaller and undifferentiated” communities such as those in Southern Africa which are believed to put more emphasis on blood relations (See MATOLINO AND KWINDINGWI 2013, 202). However, this view is also questionable because African relational ethics of *unhu/ubuntu* actually goes beyond blood relationships to include even strangers and non-human beings. For example, Samkange and Samkange cite an interesting example in which strangers may offer each other help on the basis of them being *related* to each other by virtue of just being *vanhu* (humans/persons) that are of course, connected with their totemic relations. (See, SAMKANGE AND SAMKANGE 1980, 35). In the same vein, Metz (2014, 69) reminds us of how the African practice of welcoming visitors and sharing with them even the best food might not only be applicable to small, tight-knit, and underdeveloped communities.

Fourth, the philosophy of *unhu/ubuntu* is thought to connect those communities that believe in it, especially some selected communities in sub-Saharan Africa. For Matolino and Kwindigwi, *unhu/ubuntu* is “naturally known and preferred by people of African descent” (MATOLINO AND KWINDINGWI 2013, 204). And this explains why the majority of African people outside Southern Africa may not be familiar with *unhu/ubuntu*. However, to those African and other non-African communities that are not familiar with the philosophy of *unhu/ubuntu*, it seems such a philosophy is exclusive and exclusionary in terms of applicability (MATOLINO AND KWINDINGWI 2013, 202). For the African communities that are not familiar with it, even if it is presented as an Afrocentric view, it is still not inclusive to them just like it also excludes other non-African communities, making it difficult to apply it outside that context. Yet, it does not always follow that to be African is to be naturally bound by the dictates of *unhu/ubuntu* as there is a fundamental difference between the metaphysical and the ethical (MATOLINO AND KWINDINGWI 2013, 204). It is why, for Metz (2014, 68), the view that a normative ethical theory should be identified with the society from which it has been developed is objectionable as other normative ethical theories, such as Mill’s utilitarianism and Kantian ethics are also applicable in the African context and elsewhere.

### **Conclusion**

One might be justified in holding on to some of the objections raised above and assuming that one accepts *unhu/ubuntu* to be one of the overrated concepts in contemporary Africa. Again, one might also be tempted to accept that *unhu/ubuntu* is exclusive and no longer relevant to contemporary African society. Notwithstanding these reasonable objections, which are mainly based on the existential conditions of contemporary African society as well as the problem of returning to the past, the appeal to the African philosophy of *unhu/ubuntu* is still worthwhile in order to confront the current environmental crisis which demands humanity to understand their complex relationships with different aspects of the environment. Tosam has already argued that African environmental ethics can contribute towards sustainable development and solving problems like global

warming and climate change. Hence, I submit that the current environmental crisis and lack of a comprehensive ethical framework that might guide humanity challenges human beings to re-think some of these indigenous philosophies of existence like *unhu/ubuntu* in terms of how they might meaningfully contribute towards mitigating current environmental challenges facing humanity.

### Declaration

\*The author declares no conflict of interest or ethical issues for this work

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