



Title

A demise or just a beginning of Ubuntu? A
defence of a Metzian perspective on
Ubuntu

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***Ubuntu's Relevance in Contemporary
Southern Africa:***

*A Demise or Just a Beginning of Ubuntu? A Defence
of a Metzian Perspective on Ubuntu.*

**Pogiso P. Leping
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November 2025**

Declarations

I, Pogiso Phillip Leping, hereby declare that “*Ubuntu’s Relevance in Contemporary southern Africa: A demise or a beginning of ubuntu? A defence of a Metzian perspective on ubuntu*” is my original work. It has not been submitted in any form: degree/diploma or examination, at another university. And all the citations, references or sources used in this dissertation have been duly acknowledged.

Student Signature:



Date: November 2025.

I declare that this dissertation, is a record of original work carried out by Pogiso Leping under my supervision and has been submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Philosophy, North-West University, Potchefstroom.

Name of Supervisor: Dr Mutshidzi Maraganedzha

Signature:

Date:

Dedication.

To my beloved mother:

Mantshefi Nnani Martha Leping.

(24 September. 1972)

And

In loving memory of my late father:

Sompo Sthunya.

(1972-2002)

Kare Diatla di Feta Tlhogo!!! Robala ka Kgotso Sthunya.

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I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Mutshidzi Maraganedzha, for his tireless support and professional guidance. This dissertation would not have materialised without his unwavering critical guidance and recommendations. *Ke leboga go menagane!!!*

I am forever indebted to my mother, Ms Mantshefi Nnani Leping, for her love and tireless support. This journey was not an easy one, but your support made it to a joyous one *Motsadi*. My special regards are directed to my brothers, Ramagapu “Koketso” Leping, Itumeleng Leping, and Thapelo Leping, for their love and financial support towards realising this dream.

Abstract.

Ubuntu is a concept deeply rooted in the cultural and moral thought of the Nguni-speaking communities across sub-Saharan Africa. It is a philosophy that embodies humanism and ethics, prioritising communal relationships, compassion, respect, and human dignity as vital. The concept is well captured by the aphorism “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” which simply translates to “a person is a Person through others” (Tutu, 1999:31; Metz, 2010:99; Gade, 2012; Terblanché-Greeff, 2019). The question of the “relevance” of ubuntu was raised by Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013) in their co-article, “The End of ubuntu”, which argues that the ontological conditions that had promoted the flourishing of the concept of ubuntu are no longer in existence in modern African reality. Furthermore, Matolino and Kwindigwi argue that there is a need for this concept to ‘end’ or to demise. This position never went unchallenged as Metz (2014), Chimakonam (2016), Koenane and Olatunji (2017) argued that the concept of ubuntu is still viable as an ethical theory and a way of life that can still play a role in modern African reality. Hence, this study seeks to examine the philosophical debate between Matolino and Metz on the relevance of ubuntu and the arguments for its end. This study seeks to argue that it remains relevant as it is a source of significant moral guidance and a moral compass for interpersonal relations in present-day southern Africa. Ultimately, the study concludes that ubuntu is not nearing its demise, but it should maintain its dynamism and evolve as a philosophy to be able to address social ills and complexities in the modern African era.

Keywords: *ubuntu, modernity, the end of ubuntu, the beginning of ubuntu, ubuntu’s relevance*

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General Introduction

Introduction and Background to the Study.

Introduction.

This study is based on the reality of ubuntu in southern Africa in the present context. It aims to craft a critical examination and analysis of the Matolino-Metz debate as one of the most talked-about dialogues of our time concerning African philosophy. This conversation goes beyond the ubuntu discourse to conduct a thorough analysis of the applicability and constraints of these claims in explaining and informing development in southern Africa.

Ubuntu is a cornerstone of African philosophy; it has marked cultural traditions and ethical dimensions within the Nguni cultures of sub-Saharan Africa (Metz, 2014:1). Christian Gade (2012:487) elaborates, "The concept of ubuntu is a bundle of ideas expressed for African humanism, ethics, and worldviews," particularly having to do with interconnectedness, where such connections represent the interlocked humanity or humanity that links individuals in a community." Ubuntu promotes values such as compassion, identity, solidarity, respect, and human dignity, it is encapsulated in the maxim "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*," which translates to "a person is a Person through other persons"¹ (Tutu, 1999:31; Metz, 2010:99; Terblanché-Greeff, 2019). This phrase emphasises the idea that one's humanity can and is realised through relationships with others, highlighting the importance of empathy, mutual respect, and collective identity; thus, one cannot ever truly be a full human unless one behaves in a sociable and inclusive way in communities by showing acts of empathy and mutual respect (Metz, 2014).

In essence, ubuntu has always been an integral part of the lived experiences and shared heritage of the indigenous Africans, where solidarity and a sense of belonging to one another were highly esteemed. Ramathate Dolamo (2014) and Thaddeus Metz (2007, 2011, 2014) also argue that ubuntu posits that a human is eventually realised through interaction with other agents and that empathy essentially lies behind the restoration of harmony among people living together. "Ubuntu" shows its historical roots in precolonial Africa, where communalism and collective identity were at the core of social organisation (Dalamo, 2014). Various African cultures, including the Nguni, Bantu, and Akan peoples, propounded ideals of interconnectedness, reciprocity, and

¹ According to Aïda Terblanché-Greeff (2019) "to better explain the maxim, the term person refers to the individual, whereas Person refers to the personhood an individual should strive for through the process of interacting with others (viz. humans, non-humans, and nature) in order to become fully human."

mutual respect, which they expressed through communal rituals, oral traditions, and customary laws (*Ibid.*). Despite all the divisions caused to African society by colonialism, Africa humanism (ubuntu) persists as a culture-specific foundation of identity and collective solidarity (Achebe, 1958)².

The shift in context has led to the development of controversial views in ubuntu's relevance in the modern era. Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013: 204) argued for the "end" of ubuntu, which they argue has failed both in theory and practice in this contemporary world. Its proponents propose that the traditional conditions in which ubuntu was practiced have vanished, which therefore render the moral theory 'defunct.' Following the divergence from this argument, Metz (2019: 319) and others (see Koenane & Olutunji, 2017; Chimakonam, 2016) have, in contrast, strongly contended that we should provide ubuntu another chance. It is argued that ubuntu can provide useful moral guidance, possibly in an increasingly industrial and modern context, "to do the right thing" as an individual through engaging in the collective good, which is very applicable in current spaces. The study seeks to assess the conflicting propositions surrounding ubuntu, about its current worth, and a possible outlet for its application to modern socio-political challenges. By revisiting the concept of ubuntu itself and through analysing the arguments in the context of both sides of this debate, this paper not only attempts to establish a clear image of the rebirth of ubuntu in the present situation but also contributes effectively to searching for African philosophy's future course.

The Traditional and History of Ubuntu.

Ubuntu philosophy is the worldview and way of life that Africans practiced and upheld long before the arrival of colonial settlers. The intrusion by Westerners disturbed the peaceful way of life of ubuntu. Chinua Achebe (1958) observes that the arrival of colonialism to Africa grossly disrupted traditional ways of life and indigenous knowledge systems. The introduction of colonialism in Africa includes systems of governance, economic exploitation, and cultural domination by colonial powers that effectively undermined the communitarian ethos of ubuntu. Despite this, ubuntu persisted as a resilient force of resistance against colonial oppression during the apartheid era, serving as a source of cultural identity and collective solidarity among African communities. This

² Chinua Achebe does not explicitly address ubuntu as a philosophical doctrine in this context. Instead, he provides a literary and socio-cultural portrayal of the disintegration of African modes of solidarity and shared identity. I include this reference specifically because identity and solidarity are the tenants that constitute the basis of ubuntu philosophy. Therefore, even in the absence of clear philosophical articulation, Achebe's account offers a crucial illustrative context that helps explain how ubuntu's core values are eroding. His work reinforces the philosophical relevance of this study by capturing, at a lived and experiential level, the very conditions that ubuntu aims to preserve and promote.

resilience is evident in the philosophical dialogues and enquiries practised such as the one I explore in this study, aimed at shaping African philosophy to address past injustices and cultivate a more flourishing society. Different African cultural groups, including Nguni, Bantu, and Akan, generally shared philosophies of interconnectedness, reciprocity, and mutual respect. Ubuntu became a part of African culture through communal rituals, oral traditions, and customary laws, shaping everyday life and social relationships.

Furthermore, ubuntu philosophy challenges conventional Western notions of individualism and promotes a more holistic understanding of human existence, rooted in relationality and reciprocity. Through communal rituals, storytelling, and moral teachings, ubuntu fosters a sense of belonging and interconnectedness among community members, nurturing social cohesion and harmony. Gade (2012:486), citing Roeserer and Moellendorf (2004:441), contends that ubuntu can be traced to small-scale, close-knit, and pre-colonial Africa, where communalism and collective identity were central to societal organisation, which underlies every indigenous African culture. Gade (2012), citing Bhengu (1996), emphasises inclusiveness as a primary characteristic of African 'being', positing that *umuntu* encompasses all humans regardless of race, language, political beliefs, or ethnic background.

Early academics such as John Mbiti (1969)³ and Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984) critically engaged with the moral-ethical values intrinsic to ubuntu, stressing its emphasis on empathy, compassion, identity, personhood, and communal solidarity. In the analysis of Dolamo (2014), ubuntu appears to be the prominent system of thought to embody the African sense of communality and community; it relies significantly upon the experience(s) and collective memory found among indigenous African peoples.

According to Gade (2012:489), ubuntu revolves around the ability to empathise with others, highlighting the importance of connecting with fellow human beings. This capacity for empathy extends to forgiveness rather than punishment, as ubuntu prioritises restoring communal harmony (Gade, 2012:493). For instance, when a community experiences discord, individuals

³ Julius Gathogo (2022:04) posits that John Mbiti in his 1969 authoritative book titled "*African Religions and Philosophy*" never explicitly used the term "ubuntu" or on any of his published works but alludes that his use of the Kamba proverb: "*Mundu ni mundu nundu wa andu*" which is an equal to the Nguni maxim, "*umuntu ngu muntu nga bantu*," and his prevalent quote, "I am because we are, and since we are therefore, I am," is sufficient evidence that his ideas embodied notions of ubuntu. He further argues that Mbiti advanced a theology of community and opposed individualism, and this should be understood as Mbiti's position against Western ideas that are advanced by philosophers such as Rene Descarte's who's maxim approach is, "I am therefore I exist" which is opposed to Mbiti'.

must contribute to its healing in order for restoration to occur⁴. Mazrui (2001:14-17), posits that Africans have a unique tendency to quickly forget hate; they teach their younger generations to communicate, reconcile, and identify alternative ways to address hatred. This worldview promotes communality and mutual interdependence for the betterment of the community by prioritising compassion and respect for human dignity, as highlighted by Yvonne Mokgoro (1998:15). It is imperative to recognise that, while ubuntu embodies these principles, there is no consensus on its definition, as interpretations may vary across different contexts and perspectives.

The Philosophical Significance of Ubuntu and Contemporary Relevance.

Prevalent philosophers such as Metz (2010, 2013, 2014) argue that ubuntu is still relevant and can be practically applied in the modern age, considering it the starting point of society. In his work, Metz elaborates on the valuation of human dignity, moral goodness, and solidarity. This research was catalysed by the challenging arguments set forth by Bernard Matolino and Wenceslaus Kwindigwi in their 2013 article “The end of ubuntu” and the subsequent reply by Thaddeus Metz given in 2014, “Just the beginning for ubuntu: Reply to Matolino and Kwindigwi”. In their article Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013) declared the demise of ubuntu, asserting that it has failed both theoretically and practically in contemporary times (Adeate, 2022). They argue that ubuntu is dead and efforts at reviving the philosophical subject as a political and moral theory in contemporary Africa are futile because its attempts are driven by political motives aimed at promoting African uniqueness (Adeate, 2022:327). Having announced the disappearance of the physical and societal conditions necessary for the practice of ubuntu, situations marked by small-scale, close-knit communities living a life dominated greatly by mutuality and solidarity, Matolino and Kwindigwi accuse the moral theory of being now irrelevant and extinct (Matolino & Kwindigwi, 2013:202; Adeate, 2022:327).

In his 2014 paper, Metz challenged the radical stance put forth by Matolino and Kwindigwi, suggesting that scholarly inquiry into ubuntu and its political application is only just the beginning. Chimakonam argues that Matolino and Kwindigwi's arguments were insufficient to support their radical stance that ubuntu is obsolete (2016:226). According to Mojalefa Koenane and Cyril-Mary Olatunji (2017:269-274), the conclusion that “The end of ubuntu” posed by Matolino and Kwindigwi is unjustified, rendering the moral-ethical theory obsolete solely on the basis of the

⁴ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established in July 1995, sought to address past injustices, and foster national reconciliation in South Africa. The TRC aimed to repair historical wounds and lay the foundation for a more unified and just society. Despite facing criticism, this approach aimed to strike a balance between seeking justice for past atrocities and promoting reconciliation among diverse communities.

failure of some individuals to act according to the country's acclaimed moral principles. They highlighted the possibility and relevance of practising ubuntu values and norms in a modern and industrialised African context; further, they referenced Metz's idea that political governance could support ubuntu practices by creating architectural structures conducive to the worldview (Koenane & Olatunji, 2017:275). Metz (2014:65) further argues that ubuntu serves as a promising foundation for contemporary ethical theory, by providing guidelines for moral behaviour within institutions and among their members in the contemporary era.

According to the study's thesis, the two authors' conclusion in "The End of Ubuntu" is both problematic and compelling. It is compelling because it motivates serious engagement with the tensions and shortfalls within ubuntu discourse in contemporary time, but it is again problematic in a sense that it calls for the death of ubuntu as a philosophical project. History has shown that, no theory, system, or philosophical idea has developed and progressed without being subjected to constant criticism, rather than being abandoned, even the attractive frameworks of modernity, have excelled through continuous interrogation, revision, and transformation (Koenane & Olatunji, 2017: 265). Ubuntu represents a popular and most appealing foundation for African philosophy; therefore, it should not be allowed to end since doing so would amount to upholding the Western perspective and thereby denying that African thinkers may have an outlook or entire grasp of philosophy. Koenane and Olatunji (2017: 267) aptly point out that the co-authors' conclusion is both distressing and cowardly, as it does not propose a replacement for ubuntu but instead creates a void for an easy way out.

Within the context of the ubuntu dialogue, the proposal is legitimate and raises some important questions concerning the nature of philosophical inquiry and the position of African philosophy in current debates, emphasising the necessity for continuous discussion and critical examination of philosophical views, rather than outrightly dismissing them. This article is therefore a donation at the level of a philosophical purpose, trying to join in and contribute something meaningful to the ongoing debate of many decades concerning the moral philosophy of ubuntu and the potential of its applicability to address the pressing socio-political issues of the modern period. Through thoroughgoing discussion, this study seeks to clarify the importance and implications of ubuntu within the southern African context.

The aim of this study is to highlight the challenges fostered by ubuntu and its role in contemporary southern Africa. This study will be grounded on Thaddeus Metz's ubuntu conception as a guide. First, the purpose of this research paper is to offer an interpretation of the essential concept behind ubuntu. Secondly, the study offers an analysis and critique of two opposite articles discussing the limitations and importance of ubuntu in today's world. Finally, by a Metzian

analysis, this work advocates that ubuntu is a credible and attractive moral system for the present social milieu.

Problem Statement.

Even though ubuntu has deep roots in African culture and tradition, many see it as irrelevant and inapplicable in modern South Africa. This dialogue has grown larger following a radical conclusion by Matolino and Kwindigwi, declaring the end of ubuntu through theoretical and practical failures. This question, perhaps most intrinsic to any future conversation on ubuntu and its assumption as a moral and political guiding tool in contemporary society, is the extent to which the disappearance of traditional and native space and values fits with ubuntu. However, there was a rebuttal by Thaddeus Metz, arguing for a re-evaluation of ubuntu's potential to form modern ethics. It is imperative to critically engage in the conversation about ubuntu's contemporary relevance.

Hypothesis.

While the traditional concept of ubuntu may face scrutiny in contemporary contexts, Metz's perspective offers an attractive and promising theory for re-evaluating its relevance and applicability. Through an analytical investigation of ubuntu's debate and contemporary importance, it is anticipated that this study will offer a deeper and better understanding of how ubuntu can remedy socio-political crises. Furthermore, it will engage with critiques posed against Metzian theory and offer responses on why Metzian perspective should be priced over the conclusion taken by Matolino.

The Research Question, Sub-Questions and Objectives.

The main research question that grounds this research study is: *How can the concept of ubuntu, traditionally rooted in African philosophy, be reinterpreted and applied to address contemporary socio-political challenges in southern Africa?* To adequately provide answers to this burning question, I do so by probing the following sub-questions: Firstly, what is the conceptual meaning of ubuntu, and how has it been traditionally understood within African philosophy? Secondly, what are the key arguments in the Matolino and Kwindigwi, and Metz dialogue regarding the contemporary significance of ubuntu? Thirdly, what are the implications of these debates for understanding ubuntu's place in modern southern Africa? And lastly, what is Metz's account of ubuntu, and what is its significance for contemporary moral philosophy in African scholarship? The analysis of this study initiates a particular kind of inquiry regarding the applicability of ubuntu

in modern southern Africa. The objectives of this study are also in line with the latter sub-questions. The four objectives are presented as theoretical approach to: explore and define the conceptual meaning of ubuntu within the context of African philosophy, tracing its traditional understanding and evolution over time, analyse the crucial arguments presented in the debate between Matolino and Kwindigwi, and Metz regarding the modern importance of ubuntu, focusing on their consensus and disputes, assess the implications of the discourse surrounding ubuntu and its role and relevance in contemporary southern Africa, considering factors such as cultural shift, socio-political dynamics, and global perspectives, to examine the Metzian ubuntu perspective and evaluate its potential contribution to reconciling current socio-political issues and continuing the discourse on ubuntu's relevance in modern day.

Research Methodology.

The present study adheres to a desk-based, hermeneutic approach to the data that relies firmly on extensive philosophical critical literature and pursues a thorough review and analysis of primary and secondary sources, such as journal articles, textbooks, and review articles on contemporary discourses about ubuntu. The data analysis through considered textual explication, conceptual analysis, and critical reflection should reveal the arguments, assumptions, and normative claims being invoked in the literature. Defining texts and contested concepts will be philosophically scrutinised and dialectically compared to provide a reasoned evaluation of contrary positions and a synthetic evaluation of the theoretical and practical considerations ubuntu impinges on modern discourse.

Outline of Chapters.

This study is structured into four interrelated chapters that collectively advance a critical philosophical inquiry into the contemporary relevance of ubuntu. The first chapter, *"What is the conceptual meaning of ubuntu within African philosophy?"*, offers a foundational exposition of the concept, tracing its historical origins, cultural embeddedness, and evolution within African thought. It foregrounds ubuntu's core ethical tenets, "communal relations, interconnectedness, and human dignity," as essential to understanding its philosophical significance. The second chapter, *"Ubuntu and modernity: Key arguments in the Matolino and Kwindigwi-Metz debate"*, engages with the central philosophical contestation concerning ubuntu's viability in modernity, critically analysing the dialogical tensions, points of convergence, and methodological divergences that define this debate. The third section, *"Reassessing ubuntu's role in contemporary society"*, interrogates the broader implications of this discourse for southern Africa's moral and socio-political landscape, elucidating both the strengths and limitations of diverging

perspectives on ubuntu's applicability in modern contexts. The final chapter, "*A critical appraisal of Metz's interpretation of ubuntu*", advances a philosophical defence of Metz's position by examining his relational ethical theory, assessing the critiques it has attracted, and arguing that his evolved conception of ubuntu constitutes a crucial and adaptive ethical paradigm for addressing the complexities of contemporary human coexistence. Collectively, these chapters build a coherent philosophical argument affirming ubuntu's continued significance as a living and dynamic moral philosophy in modern southern Africa.

CHAPTER 1.

The Conceptual Meaning of Ubuntu.

1.1 Introduction.

This chapter seeks to provide a genealogical account of ubuntu through exploring its multiple definitions from different southern African societies' perspectives and tracing its progress over the course of time (Nyaumwe & Mkhabela, 2007). The aim here is to investigate how ubuntu, both as a way of life and a normative ideal is interpreted in various cultural and communal environments, and how these interpretations have adapted to the changing historical and socio-cultural circumstances. The chapter's main objective is to critically explore the broadness of the concept of ubuntu by pointing out its philosophical depth and the challenges of precise definition. By so doing, it aims to demonstrate how ubuntu's expansive and dynamic nature has resulted in making it a strong ethical theory and a subject of intense scholarly discussions, especially regarding its applicability in remedying current social challenges. The premise of this study supports the Metzian perspective that ubuntu is very relevant in the modern day, but this chapter adopts a neutral position and carefully considers both positive and negative views on ubuntu's relevance. It also sets the stage for a more in-depth look at the Matolino-Metz exchange by showing how the disputed definition and scope of ubuntu leaves it open for scholars to keep asking questions about its role in modern philosophical and socio-political discussions.

This chapter will begin by providing a short overview of the concept of ubuntu through examining it from both linguistic and philosophical perspectives in efforts to clarify its meaning and implications. Second, it will use various scholars' work to trace the origins and meaning of ubuntu. It also focuses on how various southern African societies have understood and practised ubuntu. And lastly, the chapter will investigate the conceptual problems and limitations that surface when trying to define ubuntu within modern philosophical discourse. It will further emphasise how these challenges have affected current dialogues, especially those concerning its applicability to current social issues in southern Africa.

1.2 Understanding the Concept of Ubuntu

To grasp how complex and significant ubuntu is, we need to start by exploring its linguistic and philosophical roots. "Ubuntu" is a term deriving from the Bantu⁵ languages vastly spoken in the

⁵ The Nguni people are a diverse group of ethnicities in southern Africa, primarily found in South Africa, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique. They are a Bantu-speaking group with a rich cultural heritage

southern part of the African continent (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019). Cornelius Ewuoso and Susan Hall (2019: 96), in their words:

...the term 'ubuntu' has its roots in the southern African Nguni-Bantu oral traditions and is made up of the prefix '*ubu-*', meaning 'being in potency' or 'an enfolded being', and the stem '*ntu*' – meaning 'being in actuality' or 'unfolded being'. Although the specific term 'ubuntu' has its roots in the oral traditions of SA, scholars such as West and others confirm that what is implied by the term extends to other cultures south of the Sahara.

Even though different language groups employ it in diverse ways, it is always linked to notions of humanity, relationships, and moral responsibilities. Ubuntu has evolved into a vital philosophical concept that is concerned with the essence of becoming a true or full person within a communal context. This section examines the articulation of ubuntu in language and thought, providing a foundation for understanding the evolution of the worldview as well as its various interpretations and applications across cultural and academic traditions.

The linguistic understanding of ubuntu stresses how the notion is grounded in the Nguni or Bantu languages deriving from the southern part of Africa, where its important values include interdependence, communal existence, and mutual recognition. Despite the different terms in various languages, they all share the belief that one can only become a full or true person by entering more into relationships with others. This viewpoint embodies an in-depth philosophical view that one's identity and moral value are guided by how one lives and treats others.

Mutshidzi Maraganedzha (2024), citing Mogobe Ramose (2005:36), posits that ubuntu, understood from 'IsiXhosa and IsiZulu', is a composite term made from the prefix *ubu-* and the root *-ntu*, and in its basic form it means "human-ness" or "the quality of being a human" or true human. This is properly captured in the aphorism "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" or "*motho ke motho ka batho ba bangwe*", which captures the idea that "a person is a Person through other persons." This maxim advocates for mutual recognition and relational existence (Tutu, 1999:31; Metz, 2010:99; Gade, 2012:487; Terblanché-Greeff, 2019). Similar terms include '*hunhu*' in Shona and '*vunhu*' in Shitwa, both of which encapsulate a similar idea of personhood embedded in moral responsibility and communal relationships (Munyaka and Motlhabi, 2009:66-67; Letseka, 2012:48). The prefix '*ubu-*' denotes an existing yet not developed state of being or a potentiality that moves towards actualisation, denoting that '*ubu-*' is constantly moving towards '*-ntu*'; this is

and are sub-divided into various smaller ethnic groups such as the Zulu, Xhosa, Shona, Swazi, and Ndebele, among others. The Nguni are known for their vibrant traditions, including music, dance, and oral literature (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020; <https://www.britannica.com/summary/Nguni?utm>).

an expression of one becoming or being a full person. From this perspective, *ubu* and *ntu* are not separate entities; rather, they exist in fluid and dynamic interconnected relations. Ontologically, they comprise different aspects of the same process of personhood or becoming a genuine person, rather than different realities (Maraganedzha, 2024:54).

These linguistic expressions transcend defining merely human nature; they encompass a normative viewpoint of life that is grounded in the principles of interconnectedness, mutual care, and respect of other people's dignity (Letseka, 2012; Mokgoro, 1998). Gade (2012:488) observes that the diverse linguistic understandings of ubuntu among the Nguni and Bantu languages mirror a greatly shared and contextually nuanced conception of personhood in African communal thought. This linguistic difference exposes an in-depth ethical and ontological structure, where one's personhood is achieved through communal relations, creating an important foundation for the emergence of ubuntu as a sound moral and philosophical dogma. But to fully appreciate the understandings of ubuntu, it is imperative also to understand its philosophical account.

According to Metz (2013: 84), from a philosophical perspective, ubuntu reflects a worldview firmly founded on "Afro-communitarianism, which forms a basis of various African philosophical thought systems"; it represents a vision of personhood as a developmental state rather than a fixed one, where one becomes a full person through entering into meaningful relations with others. This relational conception of identity encapsulates that one understands oneself as an integral part of something bigger or a shared existence. This kind of shared existence entails that one is obligated to participate in group activities while genuinely also caring about their quality of life and flourishing within a community (Metz, 2011:538; 2013:81). The referenced African conception of personhood rejects the notion that an individual can be adequately defined only by their psychological and physical characteristics (Mkhize, 1998:1). Rather, it understands the essence of being a true person through the relationships one has in the community. From this perspective, personhood is not an isolated condition where one is sufficient by merely existing, but it is a moral and social accomplishment that can be realised through individuals' positive contributions in the lives of others. According to Ramose (2005:36-38), ubuntu's ontological grounding is based on a strong sense of interconnectedness and collective identity; he interprets the term as a linguistic synthesis consisting of "*ubu-*" as a stage indicating an unfolding or a state of becoming and "*-ntu*," reflecting a realised personhood. This fusion suggests an ongoing process of becoming in which a person's existence is forever shaped by their communal interactions with others.

Ubuntu, which comprises the prefix '*ubu-*' and the root '*-ntu*', in a basic sense means a human in transformation to becoming a true person. The root '*-ntu*' denotes an individual in their most basic form, a person who exists but has not yet fully accomplished the necessary characteristics of personhood. On the latter, the prefix '*ubu-*' denotes the development of a human potential,

signifying the existential and moral attributes such as generosity, empathy, hospitality, and compassion that make up a fully realised person (motho onang le botho) (Metz, 2011:537). Therefore, an individual who embodies these qualities is said to have ubuntu, noting that they have transcended beyond a mere biological existence to attain a more complete, relational identity founded on living ethically.

For instance, Ramose explored the concept of ubuntu in connection to the term "*umlungu*"⁶, which is commonly used in IsiXhosa and IsiZulu. According to Ramose (1999), *umlungu* represents the colonial disturbance of southern African social and ethical life rooted in ubuntu philosophy. European colonial powers came with systems of control founded on individualism and hierarchy, and they directly opposed the relational and communal principles of ubuntu. This represented an epistemic and moral fracture, collapsing ubuntu's humanist principles and replacing them with segregation, exploitation, and domination that not only subjugated but also dehumanised the people of Africa (*Ibid.*). Ramose further dissects the term '*umlungu*' through analysing its components: The term "*umu*-" signifies an individual in their fundamental biological state, similar to the "*ubu*-" in "*ubuntu*", which indicates potentiality or transitioning. The suffix "*-lungu*", on the latter, suggests a way of being that negates the moral and communal demands of being by incorporating notions of domination and segregation. In this context, the term "*mlungu*" serves as a metaphor for a distorted ontology that obstructs moral progress towards being a full person or realising complete personhood, as conceptualised in the African philosophical tradition of ubuntu.

1.3 Ubuntu: Communal Interpretations Across Southern Africa.

Felix Murove (2014: 36) posits that the difficulty in defining ubuntu stems from its fluid and diverse meanings, which fail to capture a definitive or exhaustive interpretation. According to him, ubuntu is a moral and ethical guide and lacks a specific origin in human history, thereby making it difficult to confine its meaning within strict conceptual limits (Murove, 2014: 36). Its dynamic and evolving character reflects its profound roots, deeply embedded in lived experiences and oral traditions rather than a particular historical or textual foundation. In this section, the study will explore the historical beginnings and development of ubuntu by employing different perspectives from the context of sub-Saharan Africa, where the worldview is predominantly rooted. To accomplish this outcome, the study will critically engage with several scholars who have long before investigated

⁶ Ramose frames *umlungu* not as a racial insult, but as a philosophical symbol of colonial modernity's betrayal of ubuntu. The core conflict, he argues, lies in the clash between ubuntu's communal, life-affirming ontology and the exploitative, alienating logic of colonialism. Importantly, the term does not aim to exclude or position ubuntu as inherently othering but rather critiques systems that negate shared humanity. Ramose's call is for a revitalised ubuntu and not a narrative of return, but as a framework for rehumanising African social and political life in the aftermath of colonisation and apartheid.

and theorised about ubuntu; in so doing, the study will provide strong insights into its philosophical and cultural evolution within the region.

The term “ubuntu” is derived from the worldview of the Bantu and Nguni-speaking African communities. It is an important inherent component of their cosmological worldview and fundamental ontology of personhood (Murove, 2014: 97). Gessler Nkondo (2007: 89) suggests that, even though the precise historical or natural beginnings of ubuntu remain inadequate, an imperative consensus has been established among scholars. They share the same thoughts that ubuntu as a philosophy and a way of life is deeply embedded in the cultural and moral foundations of many African societies, especially those in southern Africa. This section aims to offer an overview of the origins and historical progression of ubuntu, while taking into account that the extensive and complex nature of its genealogy cannot entirely be exhausted due to the limitations posed by the scope of this study and word count. Even though that is the case, an attempt will be made to draw out the most vital historical and philosophical points in efforts to cultivate a platform for further analysis, which can produce meaningful outcomes.

Nkondo (2007) posits that the roots of ubuntu are founded in the African ontological understanding of personhood, where human creation is perceived as a deliberate act stemming from existential necessity. In this cosmological view, the creator, commonly known as *Umvelinqangi* in IsiZulu, *Ramasedi* in SeSotho/SeTswana, *Nkhubyani* in Xitsonga, or *Uqamatha* in IsiXhosa, is believed to have brought humanity into existence. Therefore, with this creation, a strong need for relationships and interconnectedness was established. This means understanding the core principles and origins of ubuntu; one is required to recognise the innate spiritual and religious entities of African cultures. Mbiti (1969) argues that African worldviews such as ubuntu are deeply theocentric, meaning religion centres every aspect of life. Consequently, to fully appreciate ubuntu, one must engage with the sacred cosmologies and metaphysical beliefs that inform African notions of community, personhood, and moral responsibilities. The individual exists within these cosmologies and is guided by the community while preserving a unique empirical identity (Nkondo, 2007:89).

Even though belonging to a community is essentially important to individuals’ ontological and moral existence, this does not negate one’s personal agency or individualism; it rather posits that personhood is realised through being a member of a collective without compromising the self. According to Peter Mwipikeni (2018: 235), ubuntu presents an ontological explanation of humanity grounded in the notion that humanness is a fundamental characteristic shared by all individuals. Mbiti (1969:108-109) captures the idea quite well in his prominent aphorism, “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore, I am,” which encapsulates the strong connection and interdependence between one’s identity and collective existence. In essence, ubuntu began as a

philosophy that guides a way of life, and it is deeply embedded in the cultural customs, existential orientations, and belief systems of the societies that advance it. According to Nkondo (2007: 90), the principles, customs, and metaphysical understandings that characterise the African way of being and social existence have been employed as tools that guide this lived ethical system. This clearly demonstrates why communities in southern Africa view communalism as the greater moral worth. Systems of ubuntu emphasise relational engagement as necessary for the establishment of humanity; the worldview cannot be genuinely expressed without individuals collectively working together towards achieving a common social and moral goal.

These diverse expressions of ubuntu in various southern African cultures illustrate that, despite the concept's different interpretations, it is grounded in a common ethical system that goes beyond national or ethnic limitations. Due to the foregoing, understanding the history and importance of ubuntu requires one to view it as a network of interrelated worldviews that share a similar moral understanding of personhood despite its linguistic and cultural differences. This concept should not be seen as a weakness due to its resistance to a particular or limited definition. Instead, it should be understood as a dynamic philosophy that is able to adapt to the shifting social milieu, which is imperative when evaluating its relevance and applicability to the current moral and socio-political issues, which will be dealt with in the coming chapters.

1.4 Conceptual Challenges and Contemporary Limitations of Ubuntu.

Particularly in South Africa and Zimbabwe, in both the public and academic spheres, the ongoing ubuntu controversy has sparked a great deal of intellectual discussion (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2025). The central question in these discussions is whether ubuntu possesses the philosophical strength to stand firm alongside other global systems of thought and whether it encompasses the necessary tools and depth required to respond in a relevant way to the inherent challenges that modern Southern African communities face, such as inequality, historical injustice, and social fragmentation.

Ubuntu's definitional ambiguity presents one of its main conceptual difficulties. According to Muruvo (2014:36), the concept "ubuntu" has many diverse interpretations, and it is therefore expressed differently according to linguistic and cultural contexts, and as a result, it defies being limited to rigid formulations or conceptual frameworks. Even if this is the case, its flexibility reflects how adaptable the worldview is, but it also brings doubt on its coherence as a value and moral guiding tool. Yvone Mokgoro (1998) posits that defining such an African concept, especially in a foreign language and from an abstract perspective, betrays the core of the worldview, which is commonly fluid and context dependent. Ramose (2005) further elucidates that one of the major challenges to defining ubuntu or formulating a clear conceptual framework is that its roots are

grounded in oral and not written tradition. The fact that ubuntu is orally passed down means it has progressed through shared experiences and collective practice rather than systematic documentation. Its fluid and lived nature possess serious theoretical constraints, making it difficult to trace its genealogical foundations or to reconstruct it within the boundaries of formal philosophical systems.

Additionally, some critics, for example, like Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013:200-203), launched a direct critique at ubuntu, asserting that it tends to embody a particular liking of idealising precolonial communal living conditions, which may not be well suited to address the diverse, individualistic, and technologically motivated nature of modern realities. They posit that the current form of ubuntu finds it challenging to adapt to the altered realities of urbanisation, multiculturalism, and the growing disappearance of communal living (*Ibid.*). They further argue that ubuntu's relevance as a moral guiding tool in modernised communities such as South Africa has been undermined by the disappearance of the traditional social milieu in which it flourished, which is characterised by close-knit homogeneous communities. They again contend that the worldview's inability to address challenges of justice, power, and structural inequalities also raises important philosophical concerns (Matolino & Kwindigwi, 2013:203). Despite several attempts being made to focus ubuntu within political and social institutions, the analytical rigour required to systematically elucidate how a cohesive social theory and political ideal might be derived from its underlying values is still lacking (Nkondo, 2007:90).

Developing ubuntu as a viable, coherent conceptual system of thought for political conventions proves significantly difficult, especially in the absence of such critical discourse. As a result, scholars such as Metz have and continue to argue for a revised or refashioned understanding of ubuntu that is more applicable to addressing the ethical issues of the modern world while remaining grounded in African philosophical thought (2014:67-70). According to Metz (*Ibid.*), this improved version aims to modify ubuntu in a way that makes it more appealing and applicable and useful for meeting the social challenges of southern African communities. The current study will critically engage with Metz's argument for reformulation of ubuntu and defend its philosophical and practical viability in addressing the socio-political challenges facing modern southern Africa, in light of the ongoing exchange between Matolino and Metz regarding this issue.

1.5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored and traced the historical and conceptual evolution of ubuntu while emphasising its grounding on personhood, moral interdependence, and relationality, as well as its origins in Afro-communitarian values. Ubuntu is an imperative moral system due to its rich diversity and oral traditions, yet its fluid nature poses certain difficulties in defining it precisely and

implementing it on an institutional level in modern and pluralistic societies. Its applicability in tackling current challenges such as inequality, urbanisation, and systematic injustice is interrogated by a number of scholars. But rather than being dismissed, these challenges should encourage a refashioning. This section had attempted to lay the necessary groundwork for the next chapter, which focuses on the dialogue between Matolino and Metz on their take on ubuntu.

CHAPTER 2.

Matolino-Metz Debate: An Analysis.

2.1 Introduction.

The previous chapter explored the concept of ubuntu critically by considering its broadness and historical development. It was meant to bring to the readers' attention the various interpretations of ubuntu as understood in different southern African communities and scholarly traditions. However, its broadness and linguistic fluidity present significant challenges, especially in philosophical discourse and in addressing complex issues such as social fragmentation, gender inequality, and historical injustices. Such critiques should not be taken as a reason to discontinue ubuntu's philosophical significance. Instead, these challenges necessitate a careful reworking of ubuntu in light of modern realities.

This chapter will offer a critical exploration of the contemporary debate surrounding the philosophical relevance of ubuntu, with particular focus on the exchange between Thaddeus Metz and Bernard Matolino, and other philosophers on the subject will be brought into play. The aim is not to intensely defend or reimagine ubuntu at this stage, but rather to provide a rigorous and balanced account of the major arguments for and against its continued relevance as a moral and socio-political theory in modern southern Africa. This chapter refrains from adopting a definitive position in favour of or against ubuntu. Instead, it treats the divergent perspectives as constitutive of a necessary and philosophically productive dialogue. Beyond the Matolino-Metz exchange, the chapter also considers a range of supplementary critiques made against ubuntu, including concerns regarding its fostered conformity, othering or denying humanity to non-autochthonous societies beyond sub-Saharan Africa, and its tendency to romanticise precolonial African states.

The chapter proceeds in two interrelated sections. First, it will offer a detailed analysis of the Matolino-Metz debate, and it is presented with an examination of main areas of disagreement, philosophical demands, and the various dispositions that underlie their evaluation of ubuntu as a contemporary moral theory. The presentation goes beyond a mere description; it functions as a point of departure for the second critical phase. Finally, this chapter will offer a philosophical interpretation and evaluation of the conversation, identifying the limitations, and the coherence of both sides of the debate.

2.2 Critiques raised against ubuntu

According to ubuntu and Afro-communitarianism, when one fails to perform or honour their moral responsibilities through exhibiting solidarity and identity with other agents, this could result to undesirable outcomes. To elaborate, absence or lack of identifying with other members may lead to disruption of harmonious relationships, resulting to conflicts and lack of shared values. Secondly, lack of solidarity can end with individualism and isolation, leaving those who do not have much in distress, and reducing assistance in period of need. These disturbances have been linked with the downfalls of ubuntu, especially in modernised and industrialised spaces. It has been highlighted that communitarianism systems tend to neglect individual rights and liberty, and secondly, the ambiguous definition of ubuntu in Nguni languages tend to make it hard to practice the worldview in modern times. Due to the scope of this study and word count, I will only mention such critiques without engaging them. This is only done in efforts to give a genealogical account of how Matolino and Kwindigwi might have arrived at their conclusion to end talks on ubuntu in contemporary time.

2.2.1 Issues with Afro-Communitarianism

The theory of Afro-communitarianism which is advanced by proponents such as Ifaenyi Menkiti (1984) and John Mbiti (1969), started a dialogue of decades, which continued among other moral philosophers (see Metz, 2012; 2013; 2016, Matolino, 2009; and Molefe, 2017) on which nuanced form of communitarianism truly embodies the spirit of ubuntu. It has given rise to two forms of nuanced communitarianism's, namely, radical communitarianism and moderate communitarianism, and later Matolino formulated limited communitarianism as a viable nuanced form of Afro-communitarianism. Radical communitarianism is an explicit notion that individuals are bearers of laws that the community set in efforts to build and maintain harmonious relations, belonging and achievement of personhood (Mangoma, 2019:3; Chimakonam, 2022:92). From this perspective, community takes precedence over the individual. Moderate communitarianism shares ideas that are not far from radical communitarianism, its objective is to try and strike a balance between the needs of the individual and community, but even in doing so it tends to prioritise community a little above the individual.

The two nuance forms of Afro-communitarianism understand individuals as dependents of a community, and this dependency is not only limited to physical birth but also attainment of personhood or becoming a genuine person (Mbiti 1969:108-109). Menkiti (1984:172) further elucidates that, these relationships also include ancestors, language, and following social rules. They include rites and rituals as a continuous process to becoming a whole person (Mbiti,

1969:141), from an *it* to an *it*⁷ (Menkiti, 1984:174). According to Menkiti (1984:172), an individual has the capability to either fail or achieve personhood. He contends that when a person fails to satisfy their responsibilities, this can impede them from achieving the status of being or becoming a full person and therefore being unable to become a part of the collective (Menkiti, 1984:172-173; emphasis added).

From the above understanding of how one becomes a part of the collective from an Afro-communitarian perspective, John Sanni notes that such integration may result in individuals being unable to entirely disentangle themselves from that particular community, which leaves no room for individual freedom (2021:1083). According to Sanni (2021:1083) to understand ubuntu from this perspective, “is that to exist is to belong and autonomy is to seek disassociation,” because belonging is imperative to individuals’ identity and is informed by the society that an individual is part of. His notion of autonomy from ubuntu’s Afro-communitarian perspective is that, whenever one migrates from their community to other places, such an act revokes one’s status of belonging (Sanni 2021:1085). In this sense, “to be is not to belong to oneself or to be inspired by an autonomous self-absorption, but to enhance the life of others by coexisting (Sanni, 2021:1085),” unlike Metz his understanding of that idea is to posit that their possibilities of exploring are cut short. Therefore, his idea is that what is morally permissible within a community is what connects people and what separates them is wrong. From this understanding, ubuntu is good in as long as one is part of the integral, and their act to leave is to disassociate and become the other, reflecting eternal intrinsic interdependence between an individual and the community.

2.2.2 Vagueness of Ubuntu

It has been argued that the concept of ubuntu understood from Bantu languages is very vague, collectivist orientated, offers no room for individual autonomy which is valued in modern spaces, and it is deemed unapplicable for large scale, industrial and urbanised communities with secular diverse cultures in South Africa due to its traditional foundations (Metz, 2011:533-534; 2014:666).

Similar to Matolino and Kwindigwi’s (2013) finding’s, Sanni (2021:1094) argues that the type of connections ubuntu advances cannot be materialised in contemporary society, which is industrialised, and multicultural. Sanni is of the view that human societies are now characterised

⁷ According to Menkiti, when an individual is born they are referred to an “it” because they have not yet attained their status of a person and have to go through the process of rituals and rites to fully become human, for the time being they are perceived as less persons because they lack human experience. When they pass away and join the world of the dead (ancestors) they became an “it” because they no longer possess’ life (no longer the living). But there is a distinct difference between the two, the “it” status of the dead is superior to the “it” status of the unborn because the dead still retains their personhood which they have gained in their lives as part of the living to the next world (ancestor realm).

by increasing migration of people from one community to another and this is caused by the desire to improve one's well-being, such as political, religious, and socio-economic radical escape (2021:1094). This fast transition from a traditional life to a modern one has hindered individuals from sharing a way of life and exhibiting solidarity with each other, and this can serve as a sound reason for a person to possess the desire to explore and seek better possibilities and radical escape. According to Sanni (2021) radical escape can be grasped as the change in beliefs, traditions and beliefs.

In contemporary social milieu which is characterised by multiple culture and diversity, different interest can diverge with one another and result in disharmony which is not valued under ubuntu (Metz, 2011; Sanni, 2021:1094). Sanni further employs the concept "intersubjective formations" to describe that, the place of the community and individuals is based on shared spaces, common history, and values which in turn foster boundaries of exclusion and limit possibilities and escape (2021:1093). He concludes that ubuntu's communal connections limit agents of a community the possibilities of exploring because of the implemented social boundaries constituted by its customs, tradition and value system, rendering the worldview unfit for modernity.

2.3 Matolino-Metz Exchange: An Overview

Before advancing the central argument of this study, it is necessary to account for the intellectual context in which it emerges and clarify the rationale for engaging in the ongoing discourse on ubuntu. Any defensible position on the future of ubuntu in southern Africa must be grounded in a thorough understanding of the critical debates that shape its contemporary interpretation. Accordingly, this chapter is devoted to examining the important dialogue between Bernard Matolino and Thaddeus Metz, whose opposing views embody the crucial philosophical conflicts concerning ubuntu's continued relevance. Through a close analysis of their arguments, the chapter assesses the coherence and force of each position, emphasising both its theoretical merits and its limitations. In so doing, it seeks to demonstrate why these kinds of critical discussions are significant to African philosophical scholarship and the broader reflections on ethical and political life in southern Africa. This engagement lays the essential conceptual groundwork for constructing the study's subsequent normative argument. This section will begin by providing an overview of Matolino and Kwindigwi's critique posed against ubuntu, and it will be followed by Metz's rebuttal before providing the analysis of the exchange.

2.3.1 Bernard Matolino: *The end of Ubuntu*

The central idea in their provocative 2013 article, "The End of ubuntu", expounded by Matolino and Kwindigwi, is their spirited criticism and disapproval of the moral-political system standing on ubuntu in its contemporary use. In the words of Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013), ubuntu:

Since the advent of democracy in South Africa, there has been a concerted effort at reviving the notion of ubuntu. Various conceived, it is seen as the authentic African ethical concept, a way of life, an authentic mode of being African, an individual ideal, the appropriate public spirit, a definition of life itself and the preferred manner of conducting public and private business. Thus, among other public displays of the spirit of ubuntu, the government of the day has deliberately chosen its service delivery mantra and its public slogan as *Batho Pele* (people first) to animate, or perhaps pay obeisance to, ubuntu.

The co-authors contend that the dialogue on ubuntu in both academic and political spaces should be discontinued. They argue that the continued talk of ubuntu in post-apartheid South Africa serves less as a genuine ethical project and more as a rhetorical instrument manipulated by a class of emergent Black elites to secure political legitimacy and social power (Matolino & Kwindigwi, 2013:197; Metz, 2014). They further posit that, the appreciation of ubuntu is an ideology appropriated in some obscurantist idea of "African uniqueness" in efforts to preserve black culture and identity, failing to produce tangible change for either ethical or political intervention. This position arose from discussions of many scholars faced with an identity crisis and culture reclamation as they carve out a way of being African in a manner different from the Western way. Their position stems from the extensive discussions among African academics who aimed at validating an authentically African way of being that rejects colonial constraints and reclaims cultural identity⁸.

Promoters of ubuntu into modern day public discourses, e.g., the African postcolonial political elite and the NGOs have made clear that it serves as ever redresser against ontological matters. Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013:201) argue that at present, the greater population of southern Africa includes a cluster of cities with different contexts and clashing values not informed, in the

⁸ Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013) note that such attempts only ended in public and political failure. They interpret *ubuntu* as a "narrative of return," aligning it with earlier intellectual and political projects such as *Ujamaa*, Consciencism, and Negritude advanced by African leaders such as Julius Nyerere, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Kwame Nkrumah, and Kenneth Kaunda, each of whom sought to recover and promote an authentic African identity and worldview in the aftermath of colonialism. For them, these failures ought to be understood as reflections of contemporary realities and the socio-political conditions under which *ubuntu* is invoked and practiced.

least, by ubuntu. The spirit of ubuntu cannot attend to the widespread complexities of a large urban-industrial society composed of many identities and varying moral dictates. They argue that ubuntu holds much more promise for success within some closely knit, solidaristic, and relatively homogeneous communities where mutual interdependence and common moral order are still crucial to social life. There, within a closely knit community epitomising ubuntu, this spirit of ubuntu can truly flourish and be proved as being effective. This is evident when they state that:

Ubuntu, as an ethical theory that is taken to be natural to the people of sub-Saharan Africa, we argue, can only be fully realised in a naturalistic and traditionalistic context of those people. However, such a natural habitat that would favour the chances of ubuntu has largely disappeared because of the irreversible effects of factors such as industrialisation and modernity. The disappearance of such natural and favourable conditions renders ubuntu obsolete. It is obsolete by virtue of the fact that the context in which its values could be recognised is now extinct. We are of the view that in order for these values to be realised they have to be embedded in the strictures of communalism (Matolino & Kwindigwi, 2013: 203).

In line with their line of thought, but on different note they are argue that the current society is fragmented and heterogeneous, however, ubuntu inscribed rhetorically or escaped into ideologisation is likely to be used for its political manipulation, for serving the ambitions of a select body, with less attention to the genuine unity of the community (Matolino and Kwindigwi, 2013; Metz, 2014).

They further object to their interpretation of ubuntu from an inherently exclusionary essentiality, saying “our people” suggests an ethical fence dividing people adhering to values of ubuntu, meaning some people are to be kept outside, clearly advancing an othering effect against the declared universality of ubuntu. They argue that the idea of “being African” as portrayed in these stories creates discomfort with other moral or social ideals, and thus one who violates such norms of the communal entity does something considered typically “inauthentic” (Matolino & Kwindigwi, 2013: 203). Their analysis further suggests that small-scale communities, which are often viewed as fertile grounds for the cultivation of ubuntu and its ethical principles, tend to exhibit a limited tolerance for opposing perspectives. Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013) explicitly caution against preferential prejudices that favour family members and exclude strangers. Therefore, they conclude that even near-total conformity to the degree of ubuntu might, in the process, inescapably segregate recognition and interaction with anyone else external to these ethics.

The central claim to dismiss ubuntu, according to Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013), is that the current socio-political conditions of South Africa are fundamentally incompatible with a practical

expression of ubuntu. Therefore, they hold the belief that any attempt to revive ubuntu as a normative system is unfeasible (Koenane & Olatunji, 2017:264). They see revivalism as centring upon a "narrative of return" that is rooted in Africa's historical struggle to refurbish an older way of being. Thus, Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013:201) detest romanticist views and call for the rejection of any kind of revivalism embedded in an ideal past of Africa prior to colonialism and apartheid.

The study here sides with the co-authors on that point; it advances that there are some constructive ways of recovering African uniqueness, there are ways that do not depend on a nostalgic return to a precolonial past, but rather on a conscious rearticulation and reimagination of ubuntu in alignment with modern realities. To this end, the study advance and seek to promote the Metzian perspective on ubuntu as an attractive and viable philosophical framework for achieving this renewal. The co-authors acknowledge that the profound influence of modernity, globalisation, colonialism, and other transformative forces as significant factors that continue to shape and redefine the African mode of being, and the perspective I plan to advance accounts for the mentioned aspects.

For Matolino and Kwindigwi, ubuntu has conceptually weakened and normatively ossified, having little-to-undesirable roles in ethical theorising and public policy (Metz, 2014: 66). However, they warn matters calling upon ubuntu are mostly immersed in a "narrative of return" meant to retrieve the political authority, which politically often involves dispossession, authoritarianism, and economic disaster (Metz, 2014: 66). This also means that ubuntu is essentially absolutist, demanding conformity to a single ethical view, "this way or no ubuntu", and suppressing would-be different forms of living and philosophical questioning (Koenane & Olatunji, 2017: 264). Current theoretical developments and practices suggest that ubuntu has evolved into a form of rigid indoctrination rather than an ethical system that facilitates the internal critique of diverse viewpoints. Consequently, the co-authors raise a crucially contesting and compelling, though not entirely accepted, argument, establishes a scholarly critique that relies less on conventional traditionalist defences of the concept.. This paper, agreeing in broad terms with Metz's case for ubuntu, opts for a modified form of the communitarian stand by Matolino in limitation. A variation from this position fosters a notion that others can expressly grapple with the immense labyrinth of a path involving too much conformity and the subjection of the individual to the collective community. In like manner, the same shall allow room for the exploration of different perspectives on living, equally contextualised yet genuinely African.

Yet Matolino and Kwindigwi's much-vaunted criticism highlights a sobering but essential reality: compared to abstracted ideals, functioning with indigenous ethical structures in the face of today's complex truth demands irony plus contextual sensitivity. Their arguments suggest that

recklessness with tradition can lead to exclusions, normative inflexibility, and the suppression of individual autonomy on behalf of collective interests. But this does not translate to destroying ubuntu completely; rather, as this study postulates, what is required is a methodical, cautiously developed idea, an ethical and philosophical rearticulation that takes on historical antagonisms (like the legacies of colonialism and apartheid) in the pluralistic, democratic, and diverse moral perspective that is present in contemporary southern African life.

If deconstructed, the new concept of Ubuntu would only preserve its core values of relationalism, respect for human life, and solidarity while extending so much to become a platform for balancing the communal responsibilities with the individual rights and permissiveness, slugging it out with divergent perspectives, as the occasion may require, and multiplex arrangements in social and political dimensions. In this way, ubuntu could capacitate reflection on moral matters, supervene the question of social cohesion, and the moral sense of individuals.

2.3.2 Thaddeus Metz: *Just the beginning for Ubuntu.*

Thaddeus Metz made his contemplative critique in the 2014 article titled "Just the Beginning for Ubuntu" in direct response to the incendiary criticism from Matolino and Kwindigwi, challenging the claim for abandoning ubuntu, arguing that rather than being a failed project, critical appreciation of ubuntu and its political and ethical application must be considered a project still in its making. According to Metz (2010), ubuntu remains largely unexplored as a valuable resource for contemporary moral and political philosophy in Africa. While ubuntu, Metz holds, will remain a potential ethical theory and lived mode of orientation, he does not simply dismiss their claim about ubuntu freewheeling into its ruin; he does challenge the logic of their arguments. Metz (2014) asserts that the proposed critique of Matolino and Kwindigwi appears to be based on a superficial philosophical debate; they again fail to propose a viable ethical alternative capable of addressing the moral complexities of large, modern, and pluralistic societies. Contrarily, says Metz, instead of being rendered obsolete, ubuntu should rather be reinvented and reimagined so as to be compatible with the present circumstances of social existence, remaining a guideline in all relational and communistic estimations alike.

Metz's response makes a principled distinction between merely misusing a theory and its invalidity. He says that misbehaviour in applying ubuntu in the said case, opportunistic appropriation by certain elites, does not negate the theory from philosophical existence. This conclusion, Metz argues, is based on poor logic and method. Depending on his view, the adverse actions of some examples of ubuntu subscribers cannot imply invalidation of its theory. Wrongdoing by its adherents cannot be reason enough for one to exclude ubuntu as a supposed

ethical system (Metz, 2014:66). Hence, the ethical substance of ubuntu must be placed on a scale independent of the political-instrumental use of such philosophy.

That said, Metz does not pass off Matolino and Kwindigwi's critique altogether. He admits they indeed have a point concerning their critique of "narratives of return", cultural essentialism favouring pre-modern African lifeways revived for a monolithic representation of Africanness. This is evident when Metz (2013: 66) writes:

I find it hard to disagree with Matolino's and Kwindigwi's claims, here. They are correct about the undesirable functions of typical narratives of return and also correct that ubuntu is often invoked as part of one in South Africa. However, what follows from those claims with regard to whether ubuntu merits advocacy by an academic?

Even though Metz agrees with Matolino and Kwindigwi, he does not agree with their position completely, as it has the following flaws: "[It]...rests on some dubious social scientific claims about the influence of philosophical practice" (Metz, 2024: 67). Due to this, Metz submits that "Matolino and Kwindigwi face the following dilemma. Either lecturing and publishing about ubuntu as a philosopher is going to influence the practices of political elites, or it is not. If it is not, then one's lecturing and publishing may as well go on ahead, supposing there is some philosophical substance to them (which I address below)". There are two significant issues, Matolino (2015: 217) responds, that emerge from Metz's response. The first, which is in no way a small concession, is Metz's admission and agreement with us that ubuntu is a narrative of return and that narratives of return have had disastrous consequences. These admissions are quite serious and can damage Metz's position considerably. If it is the case that ubuntu is one of the narratives of return and none of them has ever registered any success, then what is the point of pursuing discussions about it as a model of what we must aspire to be? What could be the reasons for engaging in debates that seek to resuscitate a mode of thought and being that is closely modelled on failed practices? Let us take the example of African socialism. What is clear is that it has failed in public and political aspects. But African socialism was inspired by African communalism, which in turn has given rise to scholarly work known as communitarianism.

2.4 Analysis for Matolino-Metz Exchange.

The metaphysical debate on the relevance of ubuntu between Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013) and Metz (2014) marked a crucial moment in African philosophy and sparked intense debate on ubuntu's significance, its viability as an ethical philosophy, and its utilisation socially and politically. Whereas Matolino and Kwindigwi assert that Ubuntu has reached the end of its theoretical and practical utility —consequently rendering it either obsolete or susceptible to political exploitation

—Metz contends that the philosophy remains conceptually valuable and warrants reinterpretation or refinement for the modern era rather than outright dismissal.

2.4.1 Analysis for Matolino's Account.

From a textual standpoint, the article “The end of ubuntu”, taken at face value, is concerned with the possibility of whether ubuntu has outlived its usefulness, in philosophical and practical terms, and is now moot. They liken it to the experience of a skilled dancer who should know when to leave the stage; similar to ubuntu's dance in this world, its relevance and applicability are now far out of the rhythm of modernity. Matolino and Kwindigwi's analysis suggests that modernisation, urbanisation, and globalisation have dramatically transformed the social mood, leaving no room for ubuntu to establish its roots in moral or political reality. So, they maintain the argument that we should leave academia and politics as areas of engagement when dealing with ubuntu. While we can agree with their reasoning that traditional forms of ubuntu have limited effectiveness in tackling modern-day challenges such as social fragmentation, inequality, and historical wrongs, their conclusion contradicts the very essence of the philosophy they claim to uphold.

According to Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013), ubuntu has, however, not been protected from the need for its exploitation by unscrupulous elites and thus is constantly manipulated in profound shadows. Is it possible that the co-authors took it a bit too far, perhaps, by concluding that the proposed ethical paradigm is a failure only because such happens? For his own part, Metz (2014: 66) has pointed out, all acts or wrong applications of this ethics do not presuppose a view discrediting the situation; hence, he has generalised it as epistemically unjust. As Nussbaum (2003:21) disapprovingly observes, “the eclipse of ubuntu has darkened the spirit of modern-day African political systems.” This metaphor of eclipse is profoundly instructive; it suggests not the death of ubuntu, but its temporary obscuration by human failings such as greed, corruption, and moral decay. The problem, therefore, lies not within ubuntu as a moral theory, but rather within the failure of individuals and institutions to embody its principles authentically. Nussbaum's vision of “ubuntu's sunlight” invites us to imagine the transformative potential that could emerge if ubuntu were reclaimed as a vital force within the African Renaissance and extended as Africa's moral gift to a divided, fragmented world. In this light, ubuntu's emphasis on compassion, reciprocity, and shared humanity becomes not merely a nostalgic appeal to the past, but a radical ethical proposition for rebuilding social trust and moral integrity in the present. Here, aligning with Nussbaum, arguing that ubuntu is a necessary moral compass to effect healing of the entire African continent and offer moral leadership to the world. Its strength lies in its ability to humanise power, to remind political and social actors that true leadership and justice are inseparable from solidarity and mutual care. Thus, rather than abandoning ubuntu when it grows into being abused,

one should reinvent and reread it as a living ethical resource potentially providing illumination in navigating steps toward more humane, inclusive, and morally grounded societies.

One of the examples invoked by Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013:197) in support of their claim to discontinue ubuntu is that:

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 realising 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 helpless pedestrian.

Matolino and Kwindigwi use the above as an example, amongst many, to argue that ubuntu has become a lacking moral guidance, incapable of inspiring ethical conduct in modern society. Yet paradoxically, their own interpretation of this very scene exposes the rigidity of their thinking. They claim that the moral foundation of ubuntu has been compromised because the modern community has shifted beyond the fashion of ubuntu, but they themselves do not update their concept of ubuntu to accommodate modernity. Their assumption that only healthy "males" should have intervened signals an outdated thinking with an unconscious patriarchal lens persisting in pre-modern senses of moral responsibility. To have such a view in a world where gender inequality and historical marginalisation of women continue is to reinforce exactly the kind of exclusionary thinking which ubuntu seeks to transcend.

Ubuntu must be reinterpreted as an ethics of care that transcends gender, social class, and traditional hierarchies of power in order to retain its philosophical and practical relevance. Ubuntu's potential lies in its capacity to build humanity together in an evolving, pluralistic world and not on ideals of nostalgic pre-colonialism. But to assert that ubuntu is bound, it actually undermines one's resistance to rearticulation. An understanding of (the tenets of) a modified ubuntu would keep our moral responsibility as shared, knowing that it "takes a village" to not only raise a child but to sustain the morals of a community. Hence, scholars led by Matolino and Kwindigwi, who refuse to consider the revival of ubuntu, are the ones suffering from a certain

kind of imagination deficiency. Their stance is anchored in the past they claim to have outgrown. Ubuntu's relevance lies precisely in its nature to change, in its demand that our humanity is realised through continuous efforts to "share a way of life" and to "care for others' well-being." It is not ubuntu that has stagnated, but rather the lenses through which its critics view it.

Koenane and Olatunji (2017:265) rightly argue that history has witnessed no philosophical system or ideological framework birthed successfully in its first conception, since only those theories that withstood criticism, discourse, and intellectual contests remained genuinely mature, rather than escaping into a corner away from engagement or giving up under test. Similarly, Chimakonam (2016) demonstrated his desire for ubuntu to be reinvented rather than set aside. Nguyen (2015) instead calls for the restoration of the ubuntu movement. This critical examination well captures Chimakonam's (*ibid.*) summation of the task at hand: the challenge is neither to nostalgically engage a distant past nor to save a present lethargically vacuous world from tremendous vacuity. Instead, the idea is to work consciously to critically respond to a natural rebirth through a conversation with the fifth sense. In this respect, the study represents a benefit and an expression of evolving and refining thoughts regarding the problematisation of ubuntu. This insight is particularly imperative to the discourse on ubuntu, whose philosophical vitality depends on ongoing reinterpretation and contextual reflection. However, Koenane and Olatunji (2017:266) would speak out against Matolino and Kwindigwi's call for ubuntu discontinuity as an error exemplified by their failure to query ubuntu critically, an error so serious in an enterprise like philosophy that capitalises on questioning rather than abandonment.

Matolino and Kwindigwi argue that ubuntu, in practice, lends itself to exclusion and othering. The discussion suggests that by emphasising community belonging and shared identity, this philosophy implicitly fosters hostility against perceived outsiders. Alienation of ubuntu from its founding spirit readily explains the many xenophobic episodes and violent attacks targeting foreign citizens in South Africa. Contrary to Matolino's and Kwindigwi's stance, ubuntu is not commodified in any way, nor does it create hostility towards the stranger. Its ethics are based on the ethical construction of a person in the order of right action rather than on ethnic background or culture. Metz (2014) unpacks how personhood in the ubuntu theme is all about their capacity to participate actively in the life of others, their ability to care for them through their well-being, and ultimately to be centred toward bringing life back into their community. Therefore, ubuntu judge' personhood by moral quality, on how one contributes to the flourishing of others and not by prejudice on the grounds of skin colour or place of origin. Through this, wrongdoing, or any act of relational disharmony, lessens one's moral worth, while acts of kindness, solidarity, and respect enhance it. Ubuntu is therefore inclusive and pluralistic to everyone, holding the view that the very

condition of human flourishing depends partly on the affirmation of diversity as promoting that unity (Koenane & Olatunji, 2017: 267).

The crucial issue with the argument in Matolino and Kwindigwi lies in the simple fact that ubuntu is being reduced to a racial or ethnocentric construct, ostensibly confined to the Black people.⁹ Such an interpretation, they argue, is both conceptually flawed and ethically narrow, for it distorts ubuntu's universal moral aspirations. In essence, ubuntu is opposed to any form of exclusion and particularism, owing to the fact that it is ontologically grounded in shared humanity. As stressed by Letseka (2013:352), this misinterpretation should strike us as a failure to grasp that ubuntu functions mainly as a measure of righteousness based in morality; it is not an identity marker that brandishes racism or otherism. To fail at this recognition is to misrepresent Ubuntu as innately othering, when it really is a moral foundation of respecting the human dignity of every person through caring for one another, recognising each other, and acknowledging interdependence.

In this context, Koenane and Olatunji's counterargument not only defends ubuntu from misrepresentation but also reaffirms its universal philosophical relevance. Their reasoning emphasises that the continuous interrogation of ubuntu which is far from signalling its demise, represents the very process through which it can be renewed, refined, and made responsive to the plural realities of modern African societies.

2.4.2 Analysis for Metz's Account.

Metz, who stands in opposition alongside Koenane and Olatunji, brings a good counter-vision to Matolino's and Kwindigwi's thesis. He argues that ubuntu is not dead at all but in its formative stages; it would therefore be philosophically premature and methodologically erroneous in the extreme to pronounce it dead. He maintains that philosophy need not abandon concepts whose contents, though stretched and worn thin, have been subject to the pressures of modernity but rather need to be reinterpreted, refined, and adapted to new circumstances. This is a correct argument; it maintains that ubuntu is a moral-relational worldview that internally has the resources to negotiate with and evolve alongside contemporary social realities—for the philosophy of ubuntu could be reinstalled dynamically to hold a conversation in shaping moral discourse and social cohesion in southern Africa rather than dwelling in obsolescence. However, Metz himself is not without fault; his argument could at least be said to be limited in scope. Even when Metz saves

⁹ "Our project follows two main lines of reasoning. (1) We seek to show that the aggressive promotion of ubuntu in post-apartheid South Africa is an elitist project so conceived by the new black elite. It is conceived both as a restorative move that is aimed at securing the dignity of the black masses as well as an attempt at forging a so-called black identity. This line of reasoning will rely on similar historical cases on the continent that sought to aggressively promote an African mode of being, which coincided with both the end of colonialism and the rise of black elitism" (Matolino & Kwindigwi, 2013).

ubuntu from this premature euthanasia, he himself might demand, from his position, a further adjustment to engage more fully with all the material and political conditions that render ubuntu unfit for applying nowadays.

Metz (2014) maintains a two-dimensional defence of ubuntu, where he detaches the scholarly path towards understanding ubuntu as a moral theory from its political applications within the current society. Metz believes ubuntu, from an ethical standpoint, ought to guide a persuasive procedure for how people and institutions are supposed to behave ethically in the twenty-first century. In the 2017 article titled “Relational Ethics and Partiality: A Critique of Thad Metz’s ‘Towards an African Moral Theory’”, Molefe analysis Metz’s normative framework’s primarily as communally orientated, he posits that Metzian account finds moral value in an attribute that is outside the individual, such as relational harmony or communal integration instead of grounding moral rightness based on characteristics inherent to the individual (2017:54). As a result, Metz’s account seems to align closely with radical communitarianism than the moderate communitarian position he purports to support. Consequently, Molefe concludes that Metzian theory falls short in acknowledging the inherent moral value of the individual, he further argues that this omission leads to a theoretical imbalance that eventually weakens Metzian account’s normative robustness (*Ibid.*).

Metz finds himself guilty of the latter in efforts to demonstrate the universality and practical applicability of the relational view of friendliness. Yet this project finds this stance deeply problematic. Metz’s project appears less as an effort to deepen the moral and ontological roots of ubuntu and more as a refinement designed to render ubuntu globally applicable. As a result, his reinterpretation simply may change ubuntu into a commodity, turning it into an object made to fit the paradigms of Western ethics and thus erode ubuntu from the living moral philosophy generated within the everyday experiences and worldviews of southern African people.

As Mbiti (1969) asserts, to take the land¹⁰ away from African people is to strip them of their very existence, for their being is inseparable from their deep spiritual orientation toward the world. African existence is fundamentally spiritual, rooted in the interconnection between the physical and metaphysical realms. In this sense, to subtract the African ontology from ubuntu is to undermine the very foundations upon which it rests. It amounts to a negation of the worldview that provides the philosophy its moral and existential coherence. Really, any exposition of ubuntu wherein the ontological and spiritual dimensions go unexplored is in danger of doing a great disservice to southern African societies, especially when it does so under the pretext of developing a relational moral theory aimed at promoting social justice. Such an omission renders

¹⁰ I exemplify the land here as a form of ontology.

the theory internally inconsistent, for it attempts to advance justice while disregarding the very metaphysical order through which justice is conceived and experienced in African thought.

Furthermore, the position poses an important question: whether “a more sympathetic engagement with African ontology might have yielded a deeper and more balanced understanding of how African and Western philosophical traditions could mutually inform and enrich one another” (Flikschuh, 2024:1). By distancing ubuntu from its ontological foundations, Metz might have bypassed a very significant aspect that allows for a proper intercultural dialogue wherein the metaphysical richness of African thought is respected as being an equal partner in global moral philosophy, rather than being made to reconsider so as to become compatible with Western moral paradigms. Flikschuh (2024) notes, however, that one of the most effective concepts in African philosophy is “ontology,” frequently narrated regarding the person or social order, whereas in Western thought, the common narrative concerns “metaphysical institutions of morals” or “value institutions” (*ibid.*). Hence, it is conceivable why Metz’s interpretation of ubuntu becomes questioned as to its “authentic African” standing or whether it has evolved into something probably more correctly named a unique “Metzian” formulation that Matolino queries in his response to Metz’s rejoinder in 2015 against him and Kwindigwi.

Flikschuh (2024: 1-3) further contends that this rejection of ontology that was spurred by Metz partially has to do with his rather narrow, Western conception that confines ontology to the realm of beingness and lumps metaphysics as a more comprehensive umbrella of the category. In African philosophy, however, the idea of “ontology” goes beyond a tight definition: it is analysed to include both physical and non-physical realities, intertwining the study of existence with that of norms, values, and the ethical order. Thus, African ontology is not really about what “is”; rather, it is about “being” as it relates to spiritual, communal, and moral dimensions of life (Flikschuh 2024: 2). A wide gap between African metaphysical orientation and Western metaphysical orientation is perceived. Fully understood, this gap would have added to Metz’s account of ubuntu, thus also avoiding the omission of its more ontological elements.

2.5 Concluding Remarks.

In a nutshell, the Matolino-Metz exchange represents an important moment in contemporary African philosophy, elucidating both the challenges and the promise of ubuntu as a moral and socio-political framework. While Matolino and Kwindigwi’s critique highlights the dangers of ideological co-option, exclusion, and conceptual stagnation, Metz’s rebuttal underscores the enduring philosophical value of ubuntu and its potential for ethical renewal when critically refined. Together, their dialogue demonstrates that ubuntu cannot be meaningfully engaged without sustained critique, reinterpretation, and responsiveness to contemporary realities. Far from calling

the end of ubuntu, the exchange affirms the necessity of continuous dialogue as the essential of African philosophy, ensuring that indigenous thought remains both dynamic and relevant to the pressing concerns of justice, pluralism, and human dignity in modern southern Africa.

CHAPTER 3.

Reassessing Ubuntu's Role in Contemporary Society: Insights from Matolino and Metz Debate.

3.1 Introduction

This chapter builds on the previous discussion by extending its focus to the broader implications of persistent discourse on ubuntu for its place in modern southern Africa and beyond. The previous chapter engaged with the thought-provoking exchange between Matolino and Metz concerning the contemporary significance and applicability of ubuntu, exposing both the attractive and the limitations of their arguments. On the one hand, the debate warns against the narrative of return which tends to romanticise the precolonial environment where ubuntu prevailed as a guiding system of morals and communal life. And on the latter, it puts emphasis on the necessary role of critical engagements in maintaining in African philosophy a dynamic, self-corrective, and responsive to the constant changing social milieu. In this section of the study the greater objective is to draw attention to the dangers that arise when philosophical exchanges become overly abstract, circular, or detached from lived experiences. When taken together, these thoughts reveal that persistent philosophical dialogue is both important tools to refine and renew systems of thoughts and again like a pharmakon, it poses a significant danger in terms of the worldview's practicality and the ability to remain attuned to modern social and political realities.

This chapter is structured into two intertwine sections. The first section aims to reassess ubuntu's relevance in modern times, and to achieve this, it lays out the positives of sustained scholarly dialogues with more focus directed at ubuntu. Second and lastly, it offers a broad overview of such persistent debate on the relevance of ubuntu.

3.2 Implications of the Matolino-Metz Exchange: Ubuntu's Place in Modern Context.

The Matolino-Metz debate represents a significant event in African philosophy, one that not only invites but also motivates the reassessment of ubuntu's place in the modern southern Africa. As argued by Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013: 198-199), the invocation of ubuntu in academic and political space has become conceptually bankrupt, mostly utilised by the elites to strengthen their authority and positions under the false pretence of reviving "African uniqueness". Such critiques expose the risks of reducing ubuntu into a persuasive and exploitative tool, detached from its true purpose which is moral and ethical transformation. Their argument not only exposes the limits and shortcomings of ubuntu but also shows the possibility that when ubuntu is misapplied and

invoked uncritically, especially for unethical gain and exploitation may foster conformity, exclusion and ideological rigidity (Matolino and Kwindigwi, 2013: 201).

In contrary, Metz (2014:65-67) rejects the call to recognise the demise of ubuntu, arguing that the misuse and misapplication of an ethical system by certain individuals or actors such as the elites or the taxi drivers as per the example in 'the end of ubuntu' does not negate the ethical system itself. Instead, he posits that ubuntu, when perceived as a relational ethic centred on the affirmation of communal harmony and dignity which I intend to dissect on the following chapter, remains philosophically robust and normatively promising. According to Metz (2014: 65), ubuntu is not yet an outdated philosophy, rather one at its beginning in terms of scholarly and normative journey in modern context.

The outcomes of this exchange are twofold; firstly, Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013) demonstrates the imperative role of philosophical dialogues in guarding African philosophy from falling into dogmatism or being overly romanticised. Such critical engagement aligns well with Chimakonam's (2017:10) proposal that African philosophy ought to adopt a 'conversational method', where continuous rigorous questioning and critical counter-argumentation function as the heart of intellectual development. Koenane and Olatunji (2017:264) similarly argue that without continuous exchange, ubuntu stands at a greater risk of becoming either an outdated phenomena or an ideological tool to be manipulated by elites for their unethical gain. Secondly, the dialogue also exposes the limitations of philosophical debates that become overly abstract or circular. For one, Molefe (2017:175) warns against persistent dialogues over ubuntu's metaphysical support which very often fails to produce pragmatic outcomes to pressing socio-political issues such as inequality, historical injustices, and social fragmentation. Ramose (1999:51) further stresses that when ubuntu as a lived philosophy is isolated from the lived experiences of African communities, it poses a danger of being reduced to a mere project that neglects the very people in whom it is born.

Considering both the arguments brought forth by Matolino and Metz in their exchange, they highlight both constructive and cautionary aspects of persistent philosophical debates. Metz's counter argument is affirmed that ubuntu's place in modern social milieu cannot be settled by mere dismissal or uncritical support, but rather as per school of conversational philosophy, it requires continuous critical interrogation, reinterpretation, and environmental adaptation. This chapter's objective therefore is to explore both the advantages and disadvantages of such philosophical debates, arguing that they serve not only as a vanguard to prevent the stagnation of African philosophy, but also as a challenge to ensure that ubuntu remains applicable and relevant to the shifting social milieu of post-apartheid South Africa and beyond. Having said this, this chapter will endeavour to discuss the purpose and importance of philosophical exchange.

3.2.3 The Purpose of Philosophical Exchanges

The purpose of philosophical exchanges is to raise meaningful questions through open-ended conversation rather than through combative argument in which the objective is victory. Philosophical dialogue is positioned toward refining and clarifying one's thinking in the face of uncertainty, therefore it is concerned more with questioning than with securing final answers or declaring an end to inquiry. Its greater aim is to seek logic, relevance, and coherence by analysing ideas from multiple perspectives before reaching any conclusion. In the spirit of the Socratic method, one is encouraged to regard themselves as never fully certain and always in search of deeper understanding. Dialogue is the means through which contradictions are uncovered, assumptions are interrogated, and unexamined beliefs are brought to light.

This mechanism avoids the uncritical acceptance of information by demanding critical analysis and logical justification. Each exchange may open new and promising ways of inquiry, even if no definitive conclusion is reached. Like the School of Conversational Philosophy, the aim is not to opt for a definitive side but to pursue dialectical engagement by seeking a synthesis that incorporates the important attributes of opposing perspectives (Chimakonam, 2017). This approach attempts to remedy tensions rather than advancing them. It encourages one to adopt collaborative rather than competitive thinking, allowing opposing positions to work together toward deeper insight rather than victory.

3.2.3.1 Advantages of Persistent Exchanges.

According to Billion and Vellozzo (2022) numerous philosophers view enduring philosophical disputes as indicators of misguided or overly ambitious scholarly projects, with some arguing that genuinely persistent disagreements demonstrate the futility of certain debates. However, Billion and Vellozzo disagree with these diverging views, asserting that enduring philosophical exchanges are both inevitable and imperative for epistemic progress (2022). They argue that philosophical inquiry, which advances through persistent questioning rather than rushed conclusions, is deeply characterised by sustained disagreements (*Ibid.*). They mention persistent disagreements such as free will and mind-body problem, emphasising that their continuation represents the ongoing refashioning of ideas, methodologies, and assumption as opposed to failure (Billion & Vellozzo, 2022:119). The epistemology of disagreement literature contains an imperative argument developed and defended by Kirk Lougheed, who argues that if a scholar persists in developing and defending their perspective in the face of peer disagreement, particularly in the context of research, then there may be epistemic futures to be gained (2020:61). Additionally, he asserts that the epistemic advantages alone ought to be sufficient encouragement and rationale for one to stick with and defend their position. According to him, peer disputes like

the Matolino-Metz controversy tend to improve epistemic skills like problem-solving and prediction-making.

One of the primary benefits of such exchanges is that they encourage critical self-evaluation within the African philosophy (Ujoma, 2022:47). Persistent debates ensure that philosophy remains neither overly abstract or dogmatic, instead, it evolves as a dynamic inquiry kept alive through dialogue and critique while avoiding accepting uncritical concept merely for the purpose of philosophising and demand rigorous questioning, rearticulation and reformulation or defence (Metz, 2007:323; Chimakonam, 2016). The case of ubuntu in this sense is instructive, the continuous debates around the phenomena has had persistent criticism and dialogues which has motivated a number of scholars to clarify its conceptual meaning and practical application, considering the contemporary socio-political challenges. These debates, therefore, rather than undermining the significance of philosophical systems, the exchanges not only expose their internal limitations and contradictions, but they also improve and continue the discourse as a whole.

By criticising the overly romanticised and static definitions of ubuntu, Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013) encourages African philosophers or scholars at large to reconsider attractive worldviews and theories considering contemporary socio-political complexities, such as elite capture, ethical corruption, and increasing individualism. Their criticism not only stresses the ethical conundrums but also the ontological ones that African societies face, and they promote a departure from blind traditionalism. Metz's defence is equally imperative, as he argues that ubuntu's philosophical content should not be disregarded due to political misuse, and he defends it as a normative ethical theory grounded on mutual care, relationality and communal harmony. For one, Letseka (2012:48), who understands ubuntu to be a "moral compass" rather than a dogmatic historical artifact, to an extent shares similar sentiments with Metz on his emphasis that ubuntu is a living ethical tradition that is forever evolving. Chimakonam (2017) further posit in defence that ubuntu's logical ethical content in modern pluralist communities calls for a moral reconstruction of the worldview through the use of conversational philosophy.

The dialogue between Matolino and Metz thus serves as a stimulus for philosophical innovation. Chimakonam (2019) asserts that the dialogue signifies the imperative engagement that the African philosophy needs to remain attractive and relevant. He argues that through rigorous critique and counterargument, such exchanges encourage a conversational approach that question the latent of inherited systems of thought and further progresses intellectual growth and development. In his advocacy of "conversational philosophy", Chimakonam (2017) argues that debates are crucial because they transform philosophy into what he names a "living philosophy." Divergent dialogues promote a continuous refinement, reinterpretation and evolution which

ensures that African philosophy remains dynamic and meaningfully responsive to the shifting social milieu. Billion and Vellozzo (2022:122) argue that certain extended philosophical dialogues are not only valuable but also fulfil a vital meta-physical function. These disagreements mostly arise from the difficulty to reach consensus regarding which of the several divergent theoretical perspectives best captures the concept or phenomenon at question (z.). In this context, the ongoing dialogue demonstrates not a dogma but rather that philosophers are actively engaged at elucidating the fundamental terms, categories, and subjects of inquiry. They maintain that these meta-analytic exchanges are capable of resolution and can produce true theoretical progress, rather than merely pragmatic.

Thus, the fact that Matolino and Kwindigwi fail to discern any value in prolonging the ubuntu debate does not entail that such value is absent. Their call for the “death of ubuntu” is therefore insufficiently justified and ultimately premature. Even though ubuntu is founded on a traditional way of thinking, employing philosophical tools in a correct manner it can help improve and reconstruct these moral systems. The exchange between Matolino and Metz is a perfect example of how persistent inquiry can reshape ubuntu in ways that are responsive to current social conditions and shifting social milieu. Billion and Vellozzo referencing Hegel argue that “one should trust the “power of the negative,” for, in some instances, the very negativity of a sustained disagreement may strengthen the natural power of reason” (2022:155). Sustained dialogue can improve the power of reason, which is opposite to pessimistic disagreements.

3.2.3.2 Disadvantages and Limitations of Persistent Exchanges.

Philosophical dialogues are both important and beneficial for critical development, but it is also imperative to recognise their disadvantages or drawbacks. There are limitations to debates such as the Matolino-Metz exchange. Matolino and Kwindigwi’s position in calling for the early demise of ubuntu risks oversimplifying the worldview by portraying it as a dogmatic framework that is incapable of evolution. As Ramose reminds us, ubuntu must be viewed as a dynamic philosophical moral system grounded on becoming rather than fixed (2002). It is therefore not a static antique, and the call for its death runs the risk of destroying indigenous epistemologies that form the very foundations of African resistance, identity, and philosophy. Furthermore, critics like Koenane and Olatunji (2017:268) argue that declaring ubuntu obsolete due to its instrumental misuse by elites ignores how many Western moral frameworks have also been co-opted for unjust political ends, yet they continue to evolve. Similar to most philosophies, ubuntu should be critically questioned rather than calling for its end, especially when it still encapsulates meaningful notions for social justice and moral renewal (Koenane & Olatunji, 2017:275-276).

Another limitation is that Metz's response, while attractive, predominantly stresses ubuntu as a moral theory, especially in efforts to globalise it, therefore neglecting its ontological and existential aspects. Philosophers such as Ramose (1999) and Molefe (2021) argue that ubuntu transcends mere ethics, representing an African metaphysics of interconnectedness that cannot be comprehensively appreciated without considering its profound ontological commitments, including its spiritual aspects. Furthermore, philosophical debates can become excessively theoretical when they focus more on abstract distinctions that exist outside the lived experiences of the people rooted in them. A significant pitfall of a persistent philosophical dialogue, such as disputes on metaphysical foundations of ubuntu is the failure to produce a tangible solution to burning current challenges (Molefe, 2017). In such situations, the dialogue risks becoming overly abstract and losing its touch with the real-world problems it aims to resolve. Furthermore, the temporary delays between theoretical discourses and practical applications exposes the danger of prospective solutions to become outdated and end up failing to sufficiently address the shifting social milieu.

Moreover, philosophical debates often employ technical language or expression and abstract reasoning, potentially isolating broader audiences, especially ordinary citizens whose lived experiences are the very essence of ubuntu (Ramose, 1999). In these instances, philosophy may seem disconnected from the daily realities and issues of the communities it seeks to remedy and better their lives. Cautions need to be raised, especially regarding the philosophical debates such as the one between Matolino and Metz, which can fall into the trap of circular discourse wherein arguments persist without meaningful results. Chimakonam (2017) observes that repetitive or circular philosophical dialogues may stagnate without creative and conversational orientation. Without such innovations, dialogues often lapse into repetitive cycles that reinforce already established positions instead of producing new and progressive insights or advancing the discourse in a meaningful way.

This highlights an important inquiry into African philosophy regarding the need to balance between theoretical depth and practical relevance. While there is a dire need for conceptual clarity, we ought to keep in check that philosophy should possess the adequate capacity to attend to pressing issues in real time and guard it from losing itself from focusing too much on metaphysical and definitional arguments. Koenane and Olatunji (2017:275) cautions against the prolonged theoretical debates ubuntu, without sufficient emphasis on its practical implementation, they argue that such diminishes ubuntu's normative efficiency and substantially undermines its capacity as a moral framework for directing present day southern African communities. Furthermore, these may direct ubuntu philosophy into a passive endeavour instead of a moral system for transformative practice.

Even though Matolino and Metz do not reach consensus on every aspect of the exchange, they contribute meaningfully to establishing a complete conceptual analysis of ubuntu. From Chimakonam's point of view, this exchange is significant for the school of conversational philosophy as a framework that advances critical intra-African dialogues through discussions and critical conversations. The debate between these academics made sure that ubuntu is theoretically tested in line with real life challenges in efforts to end the talk on it or to call for a refashioning. It is justifiable consider the debate if we wish to identify good reasons for ubuntu as an indigenous knowledge system to be protected from abuse and dogma and to reshape it in way that fits modern political pluralism in an urbanised contemporary setting, and advance social justice and individual dignity with reference to it (Letseka, 2013; Molefe, 2020; emphasis added).

3.4 Concluding Remarks.

The objective of this chapter had been to show that ubuntu's philosophical relevance and continuation is at stake in the centre of this debate, if we are to avoid calling for its early demise both in political and academic space. The opposing positions held by Matolino and Metz have proven that there are certain advantages and limitations to applying traditional knowledge systems in efforts to redress modern challenges, but the difficulties faced should not be taken as the measure to dismiss what could be promising if refined. This calls for a need to adapt the worldview to current socio-political realities, and at the same time guard it from being too prolonged that it is outlived by the social conditions it tries to solve.

CHAPTER 4.

Appraising Metzian Perspective on Ubuntu

4.1 Introduction.

In contemporary African philosophy, particularly in the theorisation of ubuntu, Metz is among the influential thinkers on ubuntu, and his contribution has reshaped the understanding of this African ethical theory (Metz, 2007). His impact can be seen in his contributions to the discussion of ubuntu, which spanned more than a decade of intensive philosophical discussion (Metz, 2007, 2015). Metz's (2016) foundational contribution lies in his proposal that ubuntu should be understood as a basic value grounded in communal harmony, which he further explains in terms of solidarity and shared identity accompanied by goodwill. Metz (2016: 229), in his words, states:

I submit that it is up to those living in contemporary southern Africa to refashion the interpretation of ubuntu so that its characteristic elements are construed in light of our best current understandings of what is morally right. Such refashioning is a project that can be assisted by appealing to some of the techniques of analytic philosophy, which include the construction and evaluation of a moral theory. A moral theory is roughly a principle purporting to indicate, by appeal to as few properties as possible, what all right actions have in common as distinct from wrong ones. What (if anything) do characteristically immoral acts such as lying, abusing, insulting, raping, kidnapping and breaking promises have in common by virtue of which they are wrong?

In the above passage, the insight is captured that, as Metz argues, ubuntu should not be treated as a fixed or unchanging moral system. Instead, people living in contemporary southern Africa must reinterpret and refine ubuntu so that it aligns with modern social conditions. This chapter offers a critical appraisal of the Metzian perspective, examining both the strengths and limitations of his theoretical contributions to the ubuntu debate, particularly in light of the significant philosophical contestations his work has generated. Hence, this chapter situates itself within Metz's relational ethic as a fertile ground for reimagining ubuntu as a living, evolving philosophy. It argues that ubuntu's reinterpretation, when framed through Metz's lens, retains the potential to guide moral reasoning and social transformation in pluralistic, modern societies. In so doing, it affirms that the project of reassessing ubuntu is far from concluded; as Metz (2014) aptly suggests, it is only at its beginning.

This chapter provides a focused engagement with Metz's conception of ubuntu, arguing that his formulated account offers a more attractive and applicable ethical framework for the changing

social realities of modern southern Africa. While Metz departs from certain traditional ontological aspects of ubuntu, I contend that this, to some extent, enables the moral theory to acquire a renewed normative force suited to pluralistic, urbanised, and industrialised contexts. The chapter is twofold; firstly, it outlines the major critiques posed against Metz's account of ubuntu, particularly charges around its authenticity and its alleged Western rationalism, and it will offer critical responses to the posed objections. Secondly, in defending and appraising Metzian's perspective, this chapter will argue for and sustain that his relational moral theory remains the core intuition of ubuntu, where human dignity is grounded in communal harmony, while reconceptualising it in ways capable of addressing contemporary challenges such as social fragmentation, historical injustices, and inequalities.

4.2 A Critique of Metz's Perspective on Ubuntu

In "*A response to Metz's reply on the end of Ubuntu*", Matolino (2015) sharpens the earlier charge that the very project of re-systematising/refashioning ubuntu is philosophically incoherent, historically naïve, and politically dangerous. Matolino's (2015: 215) analysis of Metz begins when he states that "Metz's strategy follows two complementary paths: he starts by presenting arguments that he believes will show our position to be erroneous and then proposes what he considers to be the role of ubuntu in the modern era." Furthermore, Matolino (*ibid.*) contends that:

...the arguments Metz formulates against the position Kwindigwi and I advanced, as a counter to the redundancy of ubuntu, both as an ethical theory and as a recommended way of life fail. I will also argue that Metz's utopian advocacy of ubuntu harms his position considerably. Most importantly, I will show that Metz's brand of utopia is neither new nor promising on the African continent.

The insight that can be deduced from the above paragraph is that Metz's philosophical refashioning of ubuntu is flawed because it depends on an unrealistic vision that can work on the African continent and therefore fails to rescue ubuntu from the charge of redundancy. Further, Matolino (*ibid.*) contests the plausibility of such a strategy by insisting that the "very problem for such a position is that we are left with just competing interpretations of what ubuntu is" and that "while scholars accept that whatever can be said about ubuntu, it is a way of being for indigenes south of the Sahara, they must also accept a further premise, which is that it cannot be the case that there are many interpretations of ubuntu". The preceding sentence exposed the idea that Metz's claim that ubuntu can simultaneously be a culturally rooted, plural phenomenon and yet admit a single, systematic formulation is illogical. The vulnerability of Metz's position to Matolino's critique is more apparent when Matolino notes that Metz initially adopts a relational reading of ubuntu, treating it as a distinctly African moral theory grounded in the value of communal harmony

(Matolino, 2015: 216). Metz then argues that this value of ubuntu can serve as a normative moral principle capable of determining what makes action right or wrong. Yet, despite this emphasis on communal harmony, Metz (2015) later concedes that the absence of the conditions that favour ubuntu does not matter in the flourishing and continuing of ubuntu. This can be seen in his argument when he argues that:

For example, a state could: offer rewards; provide incentives; warn of risks; inform about goods; educate the young in certain ways; obtain pre-commitments from people to adopt certain practices; adopt 'facilitative' law that would give people legal options, such as marriage; make opportunities available; and use 'nudges' such as making bad choices harder for people to make, but not forbidding them. [...] It also could use coercion in ways that close some doors but do not force people to go through a single door, so to speak. Here, the state might prohibit television broadcasts during, say, Saturday mornings, with the expectation, but not requirement, that people would spend more time together as a family or engage in hobbies [...] (Metz 2014a: p. 209).

Matolino (2015) argues, in light of the above paragraph, that a careful reading of Metz's thinking reveals deeply troubling implications. In his view, Metz's proposals resemble the rhetoric of a regime that masks authoritarian control behind the claims of promoting the common good. This concern is visible when Metz suggests the state should use "facilitating law" to influence citizens' choices, for example, by supporting marriage while discouraging undesirable behaviour and even coercing people into prescribed lifestyle choices when mere encouragement fails. For Matolino, the issue of progression from "facilitation to nudging and ultimately to coercion" is not accidental but reveals a constituent logic in Metz's thinking. This reasoning, Matolino contends, mirrors how totalitarian governments operate. A totalitarian government begins by legally shaping behaviour, then uses persuasive propaganda to steer people in a preferred direction and finally imposes coercive measures when citizens resist. In these systems, the claim that "the state knows what is best for the people" is used either to override their autonomy or to obscure violations of their true wishes beneath the rhetoric of the "common good" (Matolino, 2015: 223). Matolino finds Metz's proposal dubious precisely because it assumes that a widely shared and enforced moral lifestyle is both possible and desirable. He argues that this assumption reflects a conservative and homogenising political outlook that treats society as if it were uniform and seeks to minimise difference.

Matolino's reading of Metz suggests that Metz's perspective presents a distinctly utopian vision. Matolino, furthermore, argues that Metz's perspective of ubuntu is not merely an academic attempt to rescue a neglected African ethic; it is a utopian programme that obliges the state to engineer citizens' conduct in accordance with a predetermined, highly idealised notion of the

“good life”. In Metz’s perspective, ubuntu is defined as a single-value normative principle, “communal harmony”, that must guide all moral judgements and public policies (Metz, 2007: 330). Matolino argues that this definition is already suspect because it collapses a rich, historically contingent set of practices into a monolithic value that can be legislated. The danger, however, lies not only in the abstraction of ubuntu but also in the political mechanism through which Metz expects that abstraction to become operative.

The political dimension of this critique is crucial. Matolino points out that Metz’s vision presupposes a state that not only recognises but also enforces a particular moral order (Matolino 2015: 221). In doing so, Metz implicitly assumes that the state is both legitimate and capable of identifying the “correct” interpretation of ubuntu and of translating that interpretation into concrete policies. Matolino argues that such an assumption is historically naïve. In post-apartheid South Africa, the state has repeatedly been implicated in the instrumentalisation of ubuntu rhetoric to legitimise political agendas without delivering the material conditions that make communal solidarity viable (*ibid.*). By invoking ubuntu as a moral compass, politicians can mask coercive policies under the veneer of cultural authenticity. When the state claims to act on behalf of “the common good” while simultaneously restricting individual freedom, the moral justification provided by ubuntu becomes a rhetorical shield for power consolidation rather than a genuine guide to collective flourishing.

Beyond the political, Matolino points to empirical contradictions that undermine Metz’s utopian claim. In contemporary South Africa, xenophobic attacks against African migrants reveal that the promise of universal hospitality, an essential component of Metz’s relational ubuntu, fails to materialise in practice (Matolino 2015, 219). If the state were truly committed to fostering a communal way of life that welcomes all, it would have to confront and prevent such violence. Instead, Metz’s perspective seems to emphasise that communal harmony as an abstract value sidesteps the structural inequalities and material grievances that fuel xenophobia. The resulting gap between the ideal and the real exposes the inefficacy of a top-down moral programme that assumes a pre-existing consensus on what constitutes a meaningful existence.

Matolino is not the only one who has issues with Metz’s perspective on ubuntu; Lucy Allais (2022), in her article titled “*Humanness and Harmony: Thad Metz on Ubuntu*”, offers a critique of Metz’s perspective on ubuntu. At the heart of Allais’s concern is the relationship between Metz’s two central claims about ubuntu: firstly, that ubuntu is fundamentally about *humanness*, specifically, the recognition of shared human dignity and relational personhood. Secondly, that ubuntu is best understood as a principle of *harmony*. According to Allais (2022: 205), Metz “proposes a single-value normative ethical theory according to which what makes an action right or wrong is whether it promotes and respects ubuntu”, understood as communal harmony. Allais argues that these

two commitments are in *tension* and that Metz has not adequately resolved the philosophical problem of how a focus on individual humanness can be compatible with a thoroughgoing commitment to collective harmony. The tension emerges when we ask: what happens when the pursuit of individual humanness, understood as the recognition and development of one's distinctive human capacities, conflicts with the demands of communal harmony? Metz's perspective does not provide a clear answer, and this lacuna, Allais suggests, represents a fundamental weakness in his position.

Allais's first line of critique concerns the *definition* of harmony that Metz proposes. Metz maintains "that the value that people are concerned with when they talk about ubuntu is communal harmony, which he further explains in terms of solidarity or shared identity together with goodwill" (see Allais 2022:204 when she is summarising Metz's position). However, Allais identifies a philosophical slippage in Metz's argument. She points out that even if we accept that full flourishing of humanness requires relationships with others, it does not necessarily follow that any form of relationship or any demand for communal harmony respects or recognises the humanness of individuals. In other words, Metz conflates two distinct propositions: (1) that humanness is relationally constituted, and (2) that harmony-seeking is the proper expression of humanness. In light of the preceding sentence, Allais argues that the first claim does not logically entail the second. One could coherently maintain that humanness is relational while simultaneously asserting that some relationships are *oppressive*, *manipulative*, or *corrosive* to genuine human flourishing.

This distinction becomes crucial when Allais examines what moral priority Metz assigns to harmony relative to other values. Allais (2022: 225) explicitly argues that "equality is simply a different value from harmony", and that "a harmonious but unequal society" might not adequately respect the humanness of all its members. She suggests that Metz's perspective creates a dangerous conflation between actual harmony and genuine humanness recognition. A community could, in principle, be perfectly harmonious precisely *because* it has successfully suppressed the distinctive voices and perspectives of its members. Conversely, a community that genuinely respects the humanness of all its members might be marked by considerable *friction*, *disagreement*, and even *discord*, as individuals negotiate the terms of their coexistence and contest definitions of the "good life".

Allais further argues that Metz's commitment to harmony as a moral principle *underspecifies* which forms of communal life actually respect humanness. Consider a patriarchal or caste-based society in which members accept hierarchical roles. Such a society might achieve considerable internal harmony, yet this harmony is purchased at the price of *denying* some individuals' full humanness. Allais suggests that "it is not difficult to imagine harmonious but unequal societies in

which not all members of the society have the same rights, for example, a stable and orderly aristocracy, caste society or patriarchy." Metz's framework, as it stands, seems to lack the conceptual resources to *criticise* such arrangements, because it privileges harmony as the ultimate moral value. If harmony is achieved, the theory appears to have no grounds for complaint, even if that harmony is premised on the suppression of certain individuals' distinctive human capacities. Allais identifies this as a fundamental *normative deficiency* in Metz's position: a moral theory that claims to be grounded in respect for humanness must be able to *critique* social arrangements that suppress or distort the expression of human agency, even if those arrangements produce communal harmony.

Moreover, Allais observes that Metz's own theoretical development reveals an *internal contradiction* in his attempt to prioritise harmony. She notes that when Metz actually attempts to defend human rights through his ubuntu framework, "rather than grounding human rights on social harmony, Metz grounds them in dignity, a seemingly separate human value". This move, according to Allais, indicates that Metz recognises, at least implicitly, that harmony *alone* is insufficient to ground a robust account of human rights. By introducing dignity as a separate foundational value, Metz essentially *abandons* his single-value theory, which is supposed to explain all moral rightness in terms of harmony. Allais argues that "this move takes him at least three steps away from his initial theory of ubuntu", suggesting that Metz's theoretical framework contains unacknowledged fault lines that undermine its coherence.

Finally, Allais emphasises that Metz's theory leaves unresolved a deep *philosophical puzzle*: if ubuntu is truly committed to recognising and respecting the humanness of each person, how can it simultaneously demand that individuals conform to harmonious social arrangements? The tension between individual humanness-recognition and collective harmony-seeking remains at the heart of Metz's position. Rather than attempting to dissolve this tension through relational metaphysics, Allais suggests that a more honest acknowledgement of the tension—and a shift in emphasis from harmony to humanness as the primary value—might yield a more philosophically coherent and ethically defensible account of ubuntu. In this way, Allais's critique does not seek to refute Metz's project entirely but rather to reorient it toward a conception of ubuntu that prioritises relational humanness over communal harmony, thereby preserving the theory's commitment to human dignity while avoiding the conservative implications of a harmony-centred framework.

4.3 A Defense of Metzian Perspective on Ubuntu.

This section seeks to offer a response to the critiques advanced by Matolino and Allais against Metz's perspective of ubuntu, even though their criticism seems persuasive and analytically sophisticated. Yet, upon closer examination, both critiques rest on a misunderstanding of Metz's

philosophical project. And they state that Metz's project harbours problematic assumptions about the nature of tradition and philosophical adaptation. Rather than ending ubuntu, Metz's careful reformulation represents a philosophical renewal, a necessary evolution that keeps ubuntu alive and intellectually vibrant within the context of modernity. A rigorous defence of Metz's position reveals that his project is not only defensible but essential to the future development of southern Africa.

The core of Matolino's (2015:217) critique, his charge of "ubuntu-talk", is that contemporary invocations of ubuntu are inauthentic, empty rhetoric and detached from genuine communal life. However, as Metz (2014:66) notes in his response, Matolino's argument fails to distinguish between the political misuse of ubuntu by elites and its philosophical validity as a moral theory. Furthermore, there are two points that are worth noting concerning Matolino's critique of Metz's perspective. Matolino seems to conflate two analytically distinct problems in his critique of Metz's perspective on ubuntu. Firstly, he says "the empirical observation that ubuntu rhetoric is sometimes deployed cynically" (Matolino, 2015: 220). And secondly, the normative question of whether ubuntu, properly understood, offers genuine ethical guidance. These are separate matters. A government might opportunistically invoke ubuntu while simultaneously violating its principles, but such an action demonstrates nothing about the validity of ubuntu as a moral theory; it only shows that political actors are dishonest.

Beyond this, Matolino's argument is underpinned by a philosophically untenable conception of "tradition.". He treats ubuntu as a static, pre-modern relic, like something that belongs to anthropology rather than philosophy (Metz, 2014:67). To support this allegation towards Metz, Matolino (2015: 215) states:

The modus operandi of scholarly enquiry with regard to such an indigenous mode of being is to interpret it in different ways that may suit each scholar's proclivities. Whether as an interpretation of what ubuntu was in the past, or what it should be understood as, or what its possible uses could be, each scholar seeks to show only that her interpretation is most plausible. Again, this could be viewed as an innocuous scholarly activity, one that has to be encouraged even, for competing interpretations of ubuntu may be seen as a mark of sensible scholarship. However, I believe that precisely the problem for such a position is that we are left with just competing interpretations of what ubuntu is (Matolino, 2015: 215).

Matolino's allegation reflects what Chimakonam (2016: 229) describes as a fundamental misunderstanding of traditions as fixed rather than dynamic. For instance, philosophical traditions,

much like a living organism, develop and transform through continual reinterpretation and dialogue.

Metz demonstrates this philosophical dynamism through a concrete example. Consider the traditional practice of *letsema*, communal labour wherein community members cooperate to harvest crops or build structures. Far from being obsolete, Metz observes that *letsema* survives and thrives in transformed forms, such as state-community collaborations to construct schools or advance social development initiatives. The *spirit* of ubuntu, cooperation, solidarity, mutual respect, and collective purpose, is thus continuously realised in new social contexts. What Matolino reads as the decay and death of ubuntu is, in fact, its transformation and renewal. Ubuntu, properly understood, is not a museum piece preserved in amber but a living ethical system capable of modern expression and philosophical elaboration.

In Matolino-Metz debates, Chimakonam's intervention is decisive not because it supports a philosophical commitment to the current research, but because it overturns the very terms on which the dispute has been fought and establishes a new methodological horizon for African philosophy. It exposes a critical category error in Matolino's critique by dismantling Matolino's exclusivist claim that ubuntu admits only a single authentic version, by reorienting the debate from a binary verdict on ubuntu's viability to a broader inquiry into the purpose of African philosophy, and by advancing conversational thinking as the normative mode of engagement, Chimakonam reshapes the debate in a way that cannot be ignored or reversed.

In the Matolino-Metz debate, Chimakonam's intervention is decisive. Its importance does not lie in simply supporting the philosophical commitments that are adopted in this research. One important factor that is brought by Chimakonam's intervention is that of transforming the very terms on which the dispute has been conducted and setting a new methodological horizon for African philosophy. In the words of Chimakonam (2016: 229):

Matolino apparently fails to understand that the version of ubuntu which Metz projects as an ethic and as a public discourse is a philosophical system taking only background inspiration from the worldview version. The sum of Matolino's criticism of Metz has hinged on the accusation that ubuntu is a narrative of return (worldview version) which he said would have disastrous consequences for any attempted modern application (Matolino 2015, 217). But I have shown in the above that Metz's understanding of ubuntu (systematised version) varies from Matolino's presumption of a worldview version.

The essence of Chimakonam's point in the above paragraph is that Matolino's critique of Metz is based on a misunderstanding on his part. Matolino assumes that Metz is promoting a traditional,

worldview-based version of ubuntu that demands a return to the past. However, Metz is actually developing a modern, philosophical system inspired by ubuntu, but not trying to revive its old cultural form. This then led to a point of Matolino attaching a version of ubuntu that Metz is not advocating.

First, Chimakonam exposes a fundamental category error in Matolino's critique by challenging the notion that ubuntu can have only one authentic interpretation. Matolino (2015: 215) insists that "there is only one possible version of ubuntu" because it is "a known and lived-out practice that either tied people in the past or ties people now" and therefore "cannot be the case that there are many interpretations of ubuntu". Chimakonam shows that this exclusivist claim conflates the descriptive, ethnographic "worldview ubuntu" with the philosophical, systematised version that Metz seeks to construct, thereby attacking the wrong target. He points out that philosophers routinely produce multiple, competing readings of foundational concepts without invalidating the concepts themselves. "Heidegger, for example, worked out his own interpretation of phenomenology... it does not follow to say that it cannot be called phenomenology because the only possible espousal of the notion had been done by Edmund Husserl" (Chimakonam, 2016: 229). In drawing this parallel, Chimakonam demonstrates that the existence of a "Metzian" ubuntu does not betray any impurity of the concept and that Matolino's insistence on a single, immutable version is a category mistake that undermines the coherence of his argument. This move not only disarms Matolino's central claim but also reframes the debate around legitimate pluralism in philosophical interpretation.

Second, Chimakonam (2016: 224) deliberately reorients the discussion from a binary verdict on ubuntu's survivability, whether the doctrine is still viable or has become redundant, to a more expansive interrogation of what African philosophy ought to be and how it should proceed. He argues that "the questions of philosophy are more important than the answers they produce" and insists that the central issue is not the fate of a single concept but the proper articulation of African philosophical inquiry itself (*ibid.*). In framing the debate between the Matolino-Kwindingwi-Metz exchange as a moment in which philosophers must reconsider "the proper questions of African philosophy" (*ibid.*), he moves the focus away from evaluating ubuntu as an ethical system toward assessing the methodological foundations of the debate.

...Perhaps [a] more fruitful...way of looking at the position of Matolino and Kwindingwi would be to consider its philosophical significance. Truth, logical precision and clearness of expression and thought have never led philosophy to any ground-breaking discoveries. It is rather the presentment of murkiness like the one in Matolino's and Kwindingwi's position that supplies philosophical excitement (Chimakonam, 2016: 224).

It is in the above passage that Chimakonam stresses that the debate should serve to “re-ask the question of African philosophy” and to develop a conversational mode of philosophising that foregrounds dialogue, systematic doubt, and the generation of new concepts rather than defending an imagined community or a static ontology. This shift turns the controversy into an opportunity to reflect on the aims, epistemic practices, and future directions of African philosophy, positioning the debate as a catalyst for methodological renewal rather than a terminal judgment on ubuntu’s relevance.

Third and finally, by proposing conversational thinking as the normative mode of philosophical engagement, Chimakonam introduces a framework that reshapes the debate in a manner that is both irreversible and impossible to ignore. He characterises conversational philosophy as “a type of philosophy that prioritises critical engagements among philosophers, and which aims, among others, to unveil new concepts, open new vistas and sustain the conversation” (Chimakonam 2015, 230) and explicitly names this pattern “conversational thinking” (Chimakonam 2015) as the preferred method for advancing African philosophy. This move does more than offer a new analytical tool; it establishes a methodological standard that redefines what counts as legitimate philosophical work on ubuntu. Any future contribution to the Matolino-Kwindingwi-Metz debate must operate within this conversational framework, rendering earlier, non-dialogical positions, such as Matolino’s exclusive reliance on “worldview ubuntu” or Metz’s isolated systematisation, methodologically obsolete. The adoption of conversational thinking, therefore, constitutes a decisive, enduring shift that cannot be sidelined without abandoning the very criteria Chimakonam sets for credible philosophical inquiry.

Now let us turn to Allais' criticism. Allais (2022) raises two major objections, as mentioned above, to Metz’s ubuntu theory: firstly, that ubuntu is fundamentally about humanness, specifically, the recognition of shared human dignity and relational personhood. Secondly, that ubuntu is best understood as a principle of harmony. Both critiques, while sophisticated in their argumentation, rest on fundamental misreadings of Metz's philosophical intentions and methodology.

Allais identifies a critical philosophical problem at the heart of Metz's ubuntu theory. She states that Metz conflates two distinct propositions: that humanness is *relationally constituted* and that humanness demands *communal harmony*, without adequately justifying this conflation. Allais (2022: 225) argues that granting persons are relational beings does not necessarily mean that any form of relationship or demand for communal harmony properly respects relational humanness. She illustrates her point through the example of a harmonious patriarchal family where women are systematically silenced, yet the family achieves considerable internal cohesion (Allais, 2022: 225). According to Allais (2022: 225), such an arrangement involves a *denial* of humanness precisely because it suppresses distinctive voice and agency. Yet from Metz's

harmony-centred theory, the family could appear morally successful because it exhibits communal harmony. Furthermore, Allais (2022: 228) observes that Metz himself seems to recognise this problem by introducing "dignity" as a separate foundational value when defending human rights—a move that allegedly reveals an implicit acknowledgement that harmony alone is insufficient as a comprehensive moral foundation. As she states, Metz's (2022:226) theory "lacks the conceptual resources to criticise social arrangements that suppress or distort the expression of human agency, even if those arrangements produce communal harmony."

However, this critique rests on a subtle but significant misreading of what ubuntu humanness entails. For Metz (2015: 71), humanness is not merely the formal fact of being in a relationship; it is a *quality* of relationship embodying specific virtues, compassion, respect, honesty, and "friendliness" understood as conscious identification with others' wellbeing. Crucially, genuine ubuntu harmony cannot suppress authentic humanness and remain truly harmonious in the ubuntu sense. True ubuntu harmony is not merely the absence of overt conflict but harmony achieved through mutual recognition, authentic encounter, and the affirmation of each person's dignity (Metz, 2015). A patriarchal society that systematically denies women voice is not genuinely harmonious by ubuntu standards; it is merely *repressed*, maintained through domination rather than authentic solidarity. Moreover, ubuntu's relational theory possesses internal normative resources to condemn such arrangements without importing external liberal principles. When persons are treated as mere instruments rather than beings capable of reciprocal recognition and moral fellowship, humanness itself is violated. The apparent shift toward "dignity" in Metz's human rights discourse is therefore not a retreat from ubuntu theory but a *clarification* of what relational humanness entails: each person deserves recognition as a being capable of genuine relationship and moral fellowship, which is precisely what ubuntu humanness emphasises.

The deeper issue animating Allais's critique appears to be an underlying liberal assumption that the primary threat to humanness stems from collective pressure toward conformity. However, ubuntu theory emerges from contexts, particularly post-apartheid Africa, where the disintegration of community, rupture of social bonds, and radical atomisation have been equally or more devastating than conformist pressure. As one source notes, ubuntu represents an all-inclusive worldview and stands for universalised (ubuntu/botho) humanness values, which are shared across cultures and which include care, respect, tolerance, honesty, hospitality, compassion and empathy, addressing precisely the destruction of relational humanness itself in contexts of social fragmentation. Allais's concerns about patriarchal suppression are legitimate and important, but they should not lead us to abandon ubuntu's commitment to relational humanness; rather, they should lead us to insist that genuine ubuntu harmony requires the authentic voice and recognition of all individuals. The solution is not to replace ubuntu with liberal autonomy-based theories but

to develop ubuntu in ways that fully appreciate what authentic humanness demands, which includes robust individual self-expression, the hearing of diverse voices, and the refusal to achieve order through suppression of distinctive perspectives. In this sense, ubuntu humanness is philosophically richer than Allais allows, containing within itself the normative resources to critique false harmonies while preserving the essential commitment to relational dignity and communal solidarity.

My position, stated at the beginning of the chapter, was a strong affirmation of Metz's philosophical refashioning of ubuntu. I maintain that Metz accurately identified and articulated the core ethical intuition of ubuntu. According to this view, an action is morally right to the extent that it fosters communal harmony and reduces discord. Furthermore, it holds that true human dignity is grounded in our capacity to form authentic, mutually affirming relationships. This perspective directly captures the essence of the maxim '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*', 'a person is a person through other persons', which I understand not as a mere description of social life, but as a normative claim about how personhood is achieved and moral worth is realised. I agree with Metz that this relational theory offers a powerful alternative to Western individualistic ethical theories, providing a basis for moral life centred on caring, sharing, and solidarity. My starting point, therefore, is that Metz provided the necessary analytic clarity to treat ubuntu as a competitive and compelling normative ethical theory.

Despite upholding Metz's central tenet, I contend that his theory, as initially formulated, requires significant reconceptualisation to fully grapple with the realities of contemporary post-colonial societies. The harmonious community Metz envisions must confront the destructive legacy of historical injustices, specifically colonialism and apartheid, which resulted in profound social fragmentation and structural economic inequalities. As some critics like Matolino and Allais rightly point out, relying solely on a call for reconciliation or "friendliness" risks obscuring the backward-looking demands of justice that are prerequisites for genuine healing. Furthermore, the concept of harmony itself must be fortified against what I perceive as "false harmony", arrangements maintained through coercion, domination, or the silencing of vulnerable populations, such as women or ethnic minorities. I recognise that a purely relational approach might be vulnerable to supporting unequal arrangements if it prioritises apparent cohesion over the fundamental dignity of every individual. Therefore, any attempt at reconceptualisation of the theory of ubuntu must ensure that ubuntu's harmony is dynamically linked to justice, requiring us to address the roots of inequality before a robust community can truly flourish.

4.4 Conclusion.

Ubuntu, defend its philosophical insights, and show that it preserves the essence of ubuntu while requiring modest reinterpretation for contemporary use. I conclude that Metz's theory is not only defensible but also indispensable and politically urgent for post-colonial Africa. Even though Matolino and Allais raise serious objections, I have argued that their critiques rested on misunderstandings. This chapter had aimed to engage the most prominent criticisms of Metz's relational theory of Metz's project. By contrast, Metz constructs a modern philosophical system in which harmony is grounded in relational dignity and genuine interpersonal recognition, never in domination or enforced unity. Nonetheless, both critics contribute meaningfully by revealing the need for ubuntu to integrate justice and address structural inequality. Thus, while Metz's theory offers the strongest normative foundation for ubuntu, it must continue to evolve through dialogue and justice-orientated revision if it is to guide post-colonial societies towards a genuine solidarity, equity, and human flourishing.

General Conclusion

This study has set out to explore the modern relevance of ubuntu and its applicability in southern Africa. It was established that Matolino's call to end talk about ubuntu in both the political and academic spaces was premature and inadequately justified. And in reaching these conclusions, the study began by building a strong foundation by tracing the history and genealogy of ubuntu and elucidating its linguistic and philosophical origins. From this, it was highlighted that while the roots of ubuntu are attractive and compelling, which grounded its understanding of a person or personhood in the Afro-communitarianism ethos of mutual care, moral interdependence, and relationality, the worldview faces certain challenges of definitional ambiguity and broadness, failing to ground it in a specific understanding. In the second chapter the study explored the exchange between Benard Matolino and Thad Metz. This was done in an effort to investigate whether ubuntu should really be a talk of the past, where close-knit, homogeneous communal life centred every aspect of life.

This debate signifies an imperative moment of our time in African philosophy, and from its examination, both the challenges and promises offered by ubuntu were exposed. Matolino argued that ubuntu is a project hijacked by elitists when invoked, catering to their unethical ends, and he further posited that any means of its application was to call for a narrative of return. He concluded that ubuntu as a moral guide fails to address modern socio-political challenges because it cannot adapt itself to a pluralistic modern social milieu. On the counter, Metz's defence argues that the stance derived by Matolino is insufficient and lacking. He contends that the project of ubuntu is far from its end, and it serves as a promising tool to ground and guide morals in the current era. Even though his defence is reasonable and, to some extent, well justified, like Matolino's, he faces certain philosophical issues. His conception of ubuntu lacks ontology, which is the very foundation of African understanding of being, and this raises serious ethical challenges towards his nuanced ubuntu.

The third chapter focused on examining the benefits and limitations of prolonged dialogue such as the one on ubuntu, and it was found that while persistent dialogues are mostly seen to birth negative outcomes, especially in remedying pressing modern issues, the positives are to be found as well. This section concluded that the challenges should not be a reason to reject what could be appealing and promising if redesigned. In this sense, a School of Conversational Philosophy was advanced as a promising tool to remedy prolonged dialogues by making sure that various philosophies stay alert to the shifting realities. Also, making sure that the engagements do not come to an end and are guarded against dogmatism. The final chapter appraised the Metzian perspective of ubuntu as a reasonable, well-justified, and promising account to ground morals

and guide ethical living in the modern period. It welcomed the criticisms made against Metz's normative moral theory and adequately addressed them. In conclusion, it has laid fertile ground for further critical engagement. It has also exposed the pitfalls of the Metzian framework, which is promoted throughout the study, and this serves to offer room for improvement in the best application and making sure ubuntu remains attuned to the contemporary lives of the southern African citizens. Therefore, this study concludes that ubuntu as a way of life and moral compass, when treated not as a dogmatic relic of the past incapable of evolution but as a living philosophy with the capacity to guide morals in the 21st century, continues to bear important promise for addressing the socio-political and moral challenges of modern-day southern Africa. To remedy the shortfalls that arise from the exchange, this paper proposes a novel concept of Neo-Ubuntu as a viable framework grounded in the southern African people's ontology to respond effectively to social ills faced in modern era and I intend to clarify and engage in this works in my PhD studies.

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