The Pleasure Principle and the Crisis of Personhood in Africa: An Ubuntu Ethical Response to Drug Abuse.

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Abstract

In light of a deeper crisis of personhood, this article explores drug and substance abuse in modern-day Africa as a philosophical problem. From the standpoint of African ethics, the study reinterprets the pleasure principle, which is typically understood in Freudian theory as the human propensity to pursue pleasure and avoid pain. It argues that, in addition to individual moral failings, the unbridled pursuit of pleasure through drug and substance misuse in many African civilisations signifies a breakdown of relational identity and communal connection. Based on *Hunhu/Ubuntu* ethics, which sees personhood as formed via relationships and moral obligation to others, the paper questions reductionist and individualistic interpretations of drug abuse.

Instead, it advances a perspective that situates drug and substance abuse within broader socioeconomic, cultural, and existential aspects of contemporary African life. The study proposes a *Hunhu/Ubuntu*-informed ethical framework that integrates lived experience with abstract philosophical reflection to prioritise rehabilitation, community involvement, and the regeneration of moral agency. Ultimately, by demonstrating how indigenous ethical frameworks may successfully engage with global theoretical concepts while addressing urgent social challenges on the continent, the study enhances contemporary African philosophy.

Keywords: Ubuntu Ethics, Pleasure Principle, Personhood, Drug Abuse

Introduction: Drug Abuse as a Philosophical Problem in Africa

Drug and substance abuse in modern-day Africa is typically seen as either a public health emergency or a socioeconomic problem. Such framings, while indispensable, tend to obscure the deeper philosophical dimensions of the phenomenon, particularly its implications for personhood, moral agency, and the fabric of social life. The growing incidence of drug and substance abuse among young people and underprivileged groups in many African contexts raises important issues related to human flourishing, accountability, and the existential and structural factors that influence moral behaviour.

In light of this, this paper argues that drug and substance abuse should not simply be understood in terms of behaviour or biology, but also as a sign of a deeper crisis of personhood. In the prevailing global discourse, drug and substance addiction is frequently characterised through individualistic frameworks that highlight psychological predisposition, personal choice, or pathological dependence [Alexander 2008]. Despite their importance, these perspectives often ignore the communal and relational facets of human life that are fundamental to African philosophy.

In contrast, African ethics, particularly as articulated through the concept of *hunhu/ubuntu*, conceives the individual as fundamentally embedded within a network of social relationships, where personhood is not

merely given but achieved through moral conduct and recognition by others [Menkiti 1984; Gyekye 1997; Igbalumun & Mutelo 2025]. From this standpoint, drug abuse signifies more than individual moral failure; it reflects a disruption in the processes through which personhood is cultivated and sustained.

The relevance of this perspective becomes even more apparent when situated within the socio-economic and historical realities of contemporary Africa. Legacies of colonialism, persistent inequality, unemployment, and social dislocation have contributed to environments in which many individuals experience alienation and diminished prospects for meaningful participation in communal life [Wiredu 1996]. In such contexts, the turn toward substance use can be interpreted not only as a search for pleasure or escape but also as an existential response to conditions that undermine dignity and belonging. This raises important philosophical questions about the nature of agency: to what extent can individuals be held morally responsible for actions that emerge from structurally constrained environments?

By highlighting these issues, this essay places drug abuse in the context of a larger ethical and philosophical discussion of Africa's crisis of personhood. By combining global theoretical ideas such as the pleasure principle with African ethical traditions, it challenges existing frameworks and advances a more comprehensive understanding of drug usage, one that incorporates lived experience, moral philosophy, and the sociocultural realities of modern African nations.

1. Conceptualising the Pleasure Principle: From Psychoanalysis to African Contexts

According to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, the pleasure principle refers to the innate human propensity to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Freud [1920] held that human activity is primarily driven by unconscious cravings for instant satisfaction, arguing that:

> *the course of those events is invariably set in motion by an unpleasurable tension, and that it takes a direction such that its outcome coincides with a lowering of that tension, that is, with an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure [Freud 1920].*

Psychoanalysis holds that the pleasure principle governs the id, the innate part of the mind that seeks fulfilment regardless of social norms or long-term repercussions. What Freud called the reality principle, which allows people to postpone gratification and adjust their desires to the necessities of social life, moderates the pleasure principle as people grow older.

Freud's theory originated within a Western intellectual tradition that prioritises the individual as the major unit of study, despite the fact that it offers insightful information about human motivation. As a result, pleasure is frequently seen as an individual psychological experience, and internal motivations and wants play a major role in explaining human action. Scholars who contend that this individualistic approach ignores the social and cultural aspects of human existence have criticised it [Alexander 2008]. Many non-Western nations, especially those in Africa, view the self as intricately entwined with social networks rather than as an independent person separate from others.

African philosophical traditions offer a different perspective on human fulfilment and desire. African ethics places human goals into the larger context of social well-being rather than treating pleasure as an individual pursuit. African ideas of life are relational, as exemplified by John Mbiti's [1969: 106] famous statement, 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am'. Participating in a community gives people purpose, identity, and fulfilment. As a result, social cohesion and moral responsibility are inextricably linked to the pursuit of pleasure.

This distinction becomes especially crucial when examining current drug misuse trends in Africa. The need for pleasure, escape, or emotional relief is the driving force behind many types of substance abuse. But the effects of this kind of activity go well beyond the individual user. Family ties, community cohesiveness,

and the moral frameworks that support social life are all commonly harmed by drug usage. Therefore, using drugs to pursue pleasure raises ethical concerns about the validity of goals that cause harm to other people.

Pleasure is not intrinsically bad in African thought. Fulfilment, happiness, and enjoyment are acknowledged as significant facets of human existence. These joys must, however, be pursued within moral bounds that protect the welfare of society. Therefore, the problem is not pleasure per se, but rather pleasure's detachment from moral obligation. This essay makes the case that the pleasure principle has to be reinterpreted using an African ethical perspective that acknowledges the moral importance of communal flourishing and the relational aspect of human existence.

2. Ubuntu/Hunhu and the Ontology of Personhood

One of the most significant intellectual and ethical traditions in Africa is Ubuntu/Hunhu. Although the idea has been expressed in many ways throughout the continent, its essential point that people become individuals via their relationships with others remains constant. The maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, or *munhu munhu nekuda kwevanhu*, meaning that a person is a person through other people, is frequently used to express ubuntu [Ramose 1999].

Ubuntu's philosophical significance stems from its conception of personhood. African thinkers such as Menkiti [1984] contend that personhood is something that can be attained, in contrast to many Western philosophical traditions that view personhood as an innate quality shared by all people. Full personhood emerges through engagement in social life and the development of moral virtues, even though biological existence may start at birth. Building directly on Mbiti's dictum, Menkiti [1984: 171] draws out its implication in terms that leave little room for ambiguity: 'as far as Africans are concerned, the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of the individual life histories, whatever these may be'. By carrying out commitments to others, exhibiting accountability, and making constructive contributions to the community, a person develops into a person.

According to Menkiti [1984], a person's identity is shaped by their community; the self develops through social engagement rather than apart from society. In a similar vein, Gyekye [1997] contends that even though people have some liberty, their identities are nevertheless closely linked to their social connections. This viewpoint highlights the moral obligations that come with belonging to a society and opposes radical individualism.

Ubuntu ethics is based on principles such as mutual care, respect, solidarity, compassion, and reciprocity [Mutelo, Sanyanga & Lemeyu 2026]. What it means to live a decent life is defined by these principles. Therefore, personhood is both a moral accomplishment and a metaphysical position. As Ramose [1999] puts it, to be human under ubuntu is 'to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish respectful human relations with them'. People are evaluated based on how well they get along with others and how they contribute to the welfare of the community. Actions that strengthen social harmony are regarded as morally good, while actions that undermine communal relationships are considered ethically problematic.

Ubuntu's relational ontology offers a useful foundation for comprehending drug misuse. If relationships are the basis of personhood, then actions that undermine those connections jeopardise personhood itself. Because drug usage has an impact on families, communities, and social institutions, it cannot be seen as merely a personal decision. Addiction frequently impairs a person's capacity to uphold meaningful relationships and fulfil societal commitments. As a result, substance misuse is a crisis of personhood as well as a health issue.

Ubuntu further holds that restoration, not exclusion, should be the main focus of solutions to such crises. Healing must include mending broken relationships and reintegrating people into society, since personhood is relational. This viewpoint has significant ramifications for how African nations handle the escalating problem of drug usage.

3. Drug Abuse and the Fragmentation of Personhood

Drug abuse is one of the most important social issues facing modern African nations. Policymakers, medical professionals, religious leaders, and community organisations are concerned about the rising prevalence of substance use among youth. Although the issue is frequently debated in terms of medicine, law, or sociology, it also raises significant philosophical questions concerning personhood, identity, and agency.

Ubuntu views addiction as a form of existential fragmentation. Self-control, moral responsibility, and social connection are frequently gradually eroded by the addict. Relationships with friends, family, and community structures often worsen as dependency increases; people may lose contact with the social networks that once gave them meaning, support, and direction. Because it upsets the relational underpinnings of human identity, this process can be interpreted as a fragmentation of personhood. *Hunhu/Ubuntu* thought highlights that engagement in social life helps people realise their humanity. The conditions required for the formation and maintenance of personhood are compromised when addiction impairs a person's ability to interact with others responsibly.

Young people are especially affected by drug misuse. Substance misuse frequently impedes opportunities for meaningful engagement in society by interfering with family relationships, work, and education. Adolescents who develop drug dependence often face prejudice, social marginalisation, and stigma, experiences which exacerbate feelings of alienation and isolation.

Addiction also undermines moral agency, the ability to act morally and make responsible decisions. *Ubuntu* regards moral agency, and the requirement to act responsibly toward others, as essential to personhood. Drug and substance abuse can impair this ability by producing compulsive behavioural patterns that compromise moral judgement and rational decision-making. Beyond the individual, personhood is fragmented at a wider level: substance misuse frequently causes social disturbance, financial difficulties, and emotional distress in families, while crime, violence, and social instability may rise in local communities. As a result, drug usage has social repercussions as well as individual ones.

Understanding addiction as a crisis of personhood shifts the focus from punishment to restoration. Rather than viewing individuals solely as offenders or patients, *Hunhu/Ubuntu* ethics encourages recognition of their humanity and potential for reintegration. Recovery involves not only physical rehabilitation but also the reconstruction of identity, dignity, and social belonging.

4. Critique of Individualistic and Reductionist Approaches

Biomedical, psychological, and criminal-justice perspectives often shape modern approaches to drug abuse. These methods have produced significant new understandings of the origins and effects of addiction. Nonetheless, they often reduce complex social phenomena to explanations at the individual level.

The scientific approach essentially views addiction as a brain disease, holding that alterations in the brain that modify behaviour and produce dependence are the cause of substance addiction [Volkow et al. 2016]. Although this approach has made a substantial contribution to scientific knowledge, it risks ignoring the social and cultural environments in which addiction arises.

In a similar vein, psychological approaches concentrate on factors such as behavioural conditioning, emotional trauma, and personality traits. While these explanations offer insightful perspectives on personal experiences, they frequently overlook more general structural factors such as poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, and historical injustice.

Criminal-justice approaches offer a further instance of reductionism. These frameworks view substance misuse mainly as a legal problem calling for societal regulation, surveillance, and punishment. Such methods

often stigmatise users without addressing the underlying conditions that give rise to addiction.

African philosophy, emphasising the relational aspect of human experience, opposes these reductionist inclinations. According to Wiredu [1996], people cannot be understood apart from the social contexts they inhabit; human behaviour results from the intricate interplay of social relationships, cultural values, structural factors, and individual agency.

According to Ubuntu, addiction cannot be reduced to a criminal offence, a neurological condition, or a psychological flaw alone. It is a multifaceted phenomenon reflecting larger social and communal upheavals. Framing addiction solely as an individual disease obscures how social injustice, economic marginalisation, and cultural dislocation contribute to substance abuse.

Additionally, individualistic therapies frequently place the entire responsibility for recovery on the afflicted individual. Ubuntu ethics, by contrast, treats rehabilitation as a shared responsibility: it is the responsibility of communities to foster healing, inclusivity, and individual growth. This holistic viewpoint provides a more thorough understanding of addiction and its underlying causes.

5. Socioeconomic and Existential Conditions of Drug Abuse in Africa

The rising incidence of drug usage in Africa cannot be understood without reference to the broader existential and social conditions of modern life. Substance misuse does not happen in a vacuum; rather, it develops in environments marked by social unpredictability, poverty, inequality, and unemployment. High rates of youth unemployment continue to affect many African nations. Many young people have limited prospects for meaningful employment and social mobility, regardless of their educational background, a circumstance that often produces frustration, despair, and a sense of alienation from the promises of contemporary progress. In these situations, narcotics may be used as a way of escaping difficult circumstances or coping with emotional anguish.

Recent empirical research in Zimbabwe substantiates this picture. Mugari's [2024] documentary survey of emerging trends in youth drug and substance abuse finds that acute socioeconomic pressures, ease of access, and porous borders are the major contributory factors behind the country's escalating crisis, alongside a diversification of substances abused. This is corroborated by Hlahla et al.'s [2024] population-based survey of 17,585 young people across twenty-four Zimbabwean communities, which found substantial rates of substance and hazardous alcohol use among youth and linked these patterns to broader socioeconomic vulnerability. Such findings lend concrete, contemporary support to the philosophical claim advanced here: that drug and substance abuse in Africa is inseparable from the structural conditions such as unemployment, precarity, and diminished belonging that erode the relational fabric on which personhood depends.

Poverty makes drug and substance abuse more likely. Chronic stress and instability brought on by economic hardship can make substances that provide momentary pleasure or comfort more alluring. Effective prevention and treatment are more difficult in communities with persistent poverty, which often lack access to adequate healthcare, educational resources, and recreational opportunities. The issue must also be placed within the larger historical framework of colonialism and its lingering effects. Colonial regimes enforced economic arrangements that continue to shape modern African societies, disrupted established social structures, and undermined indigenous institutions. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni [2013], several contemporary societal problems reflect persistent colonial practices that sustain marginalisation and inequality.

Drug and substance abuse pose fundamental questions about meaning and purpose that go beyond economic concerns. In rapidly evolving social contexts marked by urbanisation, globalisation, and cultural change, many people experience alienations. While new forms of social integration remain unclear, traditional sources of identity and belonging may weaken. Substance abuse may therefore serve as a response to existential emptiness and the pursuit of purpose. The *Ubuntu* concept emphasises the value of community involvement

and belonging: people may feel deeply alienated from society when they are denied the opportunity to make meaningful contributions [Gwara & Mutelo 2025]. Combating drug misuse therefore necessitates more than medical care; it also calls for the development of social structures that support human flourishing, inclusion, and dignity. The challenge facing contemporary Africa is not merely to reduce drug and substance abuse, but to address the structural and existential realities that make drug use attractive in the first place, an undertaking requiring ethical reflection, social transformation, and renewed commitment to the values of *Ubuntu/Hunhu*.

6. Reinterpreting the Pleasure Principle through Ubuntu Ethics

This section advances the paper's main theoretical contribution by reinterpreting Freud's pleasure principle through the ethical and relational framework of Ubuntu/Hunhu philosophy. Ubuntu ethics offers a radically different interpretation of pleasure than Freud, who views it primarily as an internal psychological sensation associated with the satisfaction of primal impulses. According to African philosophy, pleasure is a relational moral phenomenon whose validity rests on its contribution to the well-being of the community, rather than merely an individual experience.

Freud's pleasure principle is predicated on the idea of an independent person motivated by internal desires for fulfilment; pleasure remains based on self-satisfaction even when restrained by the reality principle [Freud 1920]. *Hunhu/Ubuntu* opposes the idea of the isolated self, calling this presumption into question. African philosophy views being as being-with-others, according to Ramose [1999]. Pleasure and human happiness are not found within the boundaries of personal desire, but rather within a web of social ties. *Hunhu/Ubuntu* thus modifies the pleasure principle in four important ways.

First, *Hunhu/Ubuntu* promotes relational pleasure as opposed to personal fulfilment. On this view, enjoyment is significant only when it strengthens and maintains relationships; it is unethical to enjoy anything that distances a person from their family, community, and societal obligations. Drug-induced pleasure, which frequently leads to social disengagement, neglect of responsibilities, and the collapse of relationships, fails to meet this requirement. According to Ubuntu ethics, the fundamental logic of human flourishing is at odds with a pleasure that breaks social ties.

Second, *Hunhu/Ubuntu* proposes ethical pleasure rather than unrestricted desire. African moral thought does not deny human desire but insists that desire be regulated by ethical norms oriented toward the common good. Gyekye [1997: 64–65] captures this balancing act in his account of moderate communitarianism:

> *restricted or moderate communitarianism is a consistent and viable theory, one that is not opposed to individual rights, even though it will consciously and purposively give equal attention to other values of the community, all (or some) of which it may occasionally regard as overriding [Gyekye 1997: 64–65].*

Moral agency in African philosophy, on this reading, entails balancing personal interests with communal responsibilities. Pleasure, therefore, must be ethically evaluated according to its social consequences. Unrestricted indulgence, particularly through substance abuse, represents a moral failure not simply because it harms the self, but because it undermines collective well-being.

Third, *Hunhu/Ubuntu* places more emphasis on responsible freedom than on rash gratification. According to African philosophy, freedom is the capacity to act morally within a community rather than the mere absence of restrictions. Wiredu [1996] argues that freedom can only be meaningful when exercised in ways that uphold social peace. Drug misuse weakens moral agency and the capacity for responsible decision-making, since it is motivated by impulsive gratification. Ubuntu reinterprets freedom as the capacity to seek fulfilment without undermining the prerequisites for personhood.

Fourth, *Hunhu/Ubuntu* prioritises community-centred fulfilment rather than self-centred consumption. Contemporary consumer culture often equates happiness with consumption and immediate satisfaction. Ubuntu

resists this logic by grounding fulfilment in shared life, mutual care, and social contribution. Pleasure becomes authentic when it enhances communal life rather than when it satisfies private cravings; substance abuse, as a form of self-centred consumption, reflects a distorted understanding of fulfilment detached from communal values.

From this perspective, a pleasure that destroys relationships cannot be considered authentic pleasure within Ubuntu ethics, because it undermines the very conditions of personhood. If personhood is achieved through relational belonging and moral responsibility, then any form of pleasure that erodes these foundations represents a crisis rather than an expression of human flourishing. Reinterpreting the pleasure principle through Ubuntu ethics thus reveals drug abuse not simply as excessive desire, but as a moral and relational rupture requiring ethical reconstruction.

7. Toward a *Hunhu/Ubuntu*-Informed Ethical Response

A *Hunhu/Ubuntu*-informed ethical response to drug abuse moves beyond punitive, medicalised, or purely individualistic interventions, prioritising restoration, relational healing, and communal responsibility. Because addiction is understood as a disruption of personhood and social belonging, effective responses must address both individual suffering and communal breakdown.

Community-based rehabilitation represents a central component of this approach. *Ubuntu* ethics recognises healing as a collective process involving families, peers, and community institutions. Community-based programmes create supportive environments that counter isolation and stigma, allowing individuals struggling with addiction to recover within contexts of belonging rather than exclusion, affirming the humanity of the affected individual while reinforcing communal accountability.

Family-centred interventions are equally important, given the central role of family in African social life. Families are not merely passive victims of addiction but active agents in the restoration of personhood. Ubuntu encourages families to participate in rehabilitation processes through care, guidance, and moral support, while also addressing patterns of conflict and breakdown that may contribute to substance abuse.

Restorative justice approaches further reflect *Ubuntu's* emphasis on reconciliation rather than punishment. Instead of criminalising users and subjecting them to exclusionary legal processes, restorative justice seeks to repair harm, restore dignity, and reintegrate individuals into community life, acknowledging wrongdoing while prioritising healing, accountability, and social repair. Traditional leadership and local institutions also play a vital role in *Ubuntu*-informed responses. Chiefs, elders, and community councils possess moral authority and cultural legitimacy that can facilitate dialogue, mediation, and moral education, situating rehabilitation within culturally meaningful frameworks that resonate with local values and practices.

Religious and spiritual resources remain significant sources of moral guidance and emotional support across African societies. Churches, mosques, and traditional spiritual institutions often provide counselling, moral instruction, and community support networks that complement formal rehabilitation efforts. *Hunhu/Ubuntu* ethics recognises spirituality as integral to human wholeness and moral reconstruction.

Finally, youth empowerment initiatives are essential for prevention and long-term transformation. Creating opportunities for education, employment, creativity, and civic participation restores dignity and purpose among young people. *Ubuntu* emphasises nurturing the potential of youth as future bearers of communal values, making empowerment a moral imperative rather than a mere policy option.

8. Philosophy and Lived Reality: Bridging Theory and Practice

African philosophy has long resisted the separation of theory from lived reality. Ubuntu ethics, in particular, insists that philosophical reflection must inform concrete social practice. As Ramose [1999] argues, African philosophy is inseparable from the lived experiences and struggles of African people. Similarly, Wiredu [1996] emphasises that philosophy must contribute to practical reasoning and social transformation.

Applying *Hunhu/Ubuntu* theory to drug abuse demonstrates the practical relevance of African philosophy. At the level of public policy, *Ubuntu* encourages policy frameworks that prioritise social inclusion, rehabilitation, and community development over criminalisation and exclusion. Policies grounded in relational ethics are more likely to address structural causes of substance abuse and promote sustainable solutions, a point reinforced by the emerging-trends evidence discussed above [Mugari 2024], which shows that punitive responses alone have failed to contain Zimbabwe's evolving drug crisis. In drug rehabilitation programmes, *Hunhu/Ubuntu* informs holistic models that integrate medical treatment with social reintegration, moral education, and community support. Recovery is understood not only as physical sobriety but as the restoration of personhood and social belonging. By bridging philosophy and lived reality, *Hunhu/Ubuntu* demonstrates that African ethics is not merely theoretical but deeply practical, offering resources for addressing contemporary social crises.

Conclusion: Reclaiming Personhood in Contemporary Africa

This paper has maintained that drug misuse in modern-day Africa is not just a medical, psychiatric, or criminal issue but rather a serious crisis of personhood. Prevailing approaches to addiction remain overly individualistic, emphasising personal pathology at the expense of the relational, moral, and structural dimensions of human existence.

The *Ubuntu/Hunhu* philosophy views personhood as relational, morally based, and socially constructed, providing a more comprehensive ethical framework. From this perspective, substance misuse is a disruption in the processes that establish and maintain personhood. The essay has shown that, rather than being an unrestrained quest for personal fulfilment, the pleasure principle needs to be rethought as relational and morally responsible.

By reinterpreting pleasure through *Ubuntu* ethics, the paper has demonstrated that genuine joy is inextricably linked to ethical self-regulation, responsible freedom, and social flourishing. The very conditions of human existence are undermined by pleasure that ruins relationships, and such pleasure thus cannot be considered true fulfilment. In the end, this essay confirms that African philosophy can directly address current socioeconomic problems. *Ubuntu* ethics offers conceptual tools for reconsidering addiction, devising moral solutions, and mending social ties. Reclaiming personhood in modern-day Africa therefore requires ethical renewal grounded in indigenous philosophical traditions that uphold human dignity, solidarity, and shared flourishing, alongside technical and clinical solutions.

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