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The Transcendence of Virtue Ethics Over Utilitarianism and Deontology in Bioethics and Medicine: Lessons from South Africa.

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Abstract

The field of biomedical ethics navigates complex moral landscapes, applying ethical principles and frameworks to inform decision-making in healthcare and research settings. At the forefront of this field are two influential ethical theories: utilitarianism and deontology. The interplay between these two theories significantly shapes ethical decision-making. However, reconciling their principles can be challenging, particularly when they yield conflicting courses of action. Resolving ethical dilemmas in bioethics and medical contexts demands thoughtful analysis, balancing competing values and principles to yield decisions that respect the autonomy and dignity of patients while promoting their well-being and safety. This paper evaluates three approaches – utilitarian, deontological and virtue ethics – using examples from South Africa. However, it argues in favour of virtue ethics for the following reasons: in contrast to utilitarian and deontological approaches, which focus on what *I ought to do* in various circumstances, emphasising actions and looking particularly to their consequences, the central questions of virtue ethics are: *what is the good life* for me as a human being; *what kind of person* should I want to become? Because moral actions entail more than just calculating outcomes, virtue ethics also transcends the focus on consequences.

Keywords: utilitarian, deontology, consequences, virtue ethics, autonomy, dignity, wellbeing.

Introduction

The field of biomedical ethics navigates complex moral landscapes, applying ethical principles and frameworks to inform decision-making in healthcare and research settings. At the forefront of this field are two influential ethical theories: utilitarianism and deontology. According to utilitarian theory, as developed by John Stuart Mill [1879] and Jeremy Bentham [1907], actions are morally justified by their capacity to maximise overall well-being and promote the greater good. This consequentialist approach prioritises actions that maximise well-being, measured in terms of pleasure, happiness, welfare, and preference satisfaction [Beauchamp and Childress 1994:361]. In contrast, deontological ethics, as formulated by Immanuel Kant in his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, emphasises the importance of adhering to universal moral duties and principles, irrespective of their consequences [Kant 2002]. Rooted in reason [Kant 2015] rather than intuition, deontology is grounded in respect for autonomy and the inherent dignity of individuals [Beauchamp and Childress 1994:361]. It also focuses on the 'action or the motive' [Stewart 2009:12].

The interplay between these two theories significantly shapes ethical decision-making in clinical and research settings. However, reconciling these principles can be challenging, particularly when they yield conflicting courses of action. Resolving ethical dilemmas in biomedical contexts and traditional professions like medicine demands thoughtful analysis, balancing competing values and principles to yield decisions that respect the autonomy and dignity of patients while promoting their well-being and safety. However, relying

on the two approaches, one sees a difficulty in which a moral agent or acting person is stuck midway, not knowing which of the rival rules is the right one.

This paper will assess the strengths and limitations of both utilitarian and deontological approaches and argue in favour of virtue ethics. Whilst showing how utilitarianism and deontology approaches offer a framework for moral decision–making, this paper will argue and demonstrate the transcendence of virtue ethics in bioethical research and traditional professions like medicine with lessons from a South African context. The paper will further show that virtue ethics is arguably the most holistic approach, as it gets to the source of behaviour by focusing on the 'agent, that is, the person doing the act' [Stewart 2009:12].

1. Utility and Deontology Approaches: Strengths and Limitations

This part provides a brief description of the contents of utilitarianism and deontology. We will then examine the strengths of each approach to demonstrate that they all offer a framework for moral decision-making. However, it will still be determined that each approach presents feasible limitations.

1.1 Utilitarian Approach

According to utilitarian theory, as developed by John Stuart Mill [1879] and Jeremy Bentham [1907], actions are morally justified by their capacity to maximise overall well-being and promote the greater good. Both Mill and Bentham accept that the morality of an action should be assessed based on the utility or how well it serves to advance the general welfare of all or the greatest happiness. Although utilitarianism has always had trouble with its own logic given its diverse understanding, it may perhaps make out the best case for itself by pointing out its own strengths but also exhibiting shortcomings.

1.1.1 Strengths

However, utilitarianism has many strengths that include the acceptance of a significant role in formulating public health policy. According to Chukwuneke and Ezenwugo [2022:23], utilitarianism offers many examples from everyday life. Particularly calculating what should be done by maximising resources and promoting equality in medical care.

1.1.1.1 Maximises Overall Health and Well-being

The utilitarian approach is effective in public health because it prioritises actions that bring the greatest happiness or benefit to the largest number of people. This approach aligns with the goals of public health like disease prevention, health education and large-scale treatment programs. All of which aim to maximise overall happiness or well-being. By focusing on the greater good, utilitarians believe that happiness is the goal, and that actions should be guided by what benefits the most people [Rachels and Rachels 2010:119].

This approach is evident in South Africa's response to HIV, where utilitarian thinking has shaped public health strategies. The South African National Strategic Plan 2007-2011 report has shown, for example, that the 2010 HIV testing and counselling campaign, which aimed to test 15 million people within a year, was a large-scale effort that prioritised the greatest benefit for the greatest number. By doing so, it led to earlier diagnoses, improved access to care, and reduced suffering for individuals, while decreasing community transmission of the disease [South African Government National Strategic Plan 2007-2011]. Other reports have also demonstrated that the approach supports practical public health planning and justifies investments in prevention measures like condom distribution, pre-exposure prophylaxis [PrEP] programs, school-based HIV education and voluntary male circumcision [Statistics South Africa 2025:8; Leigh F Johnson *et al.,* 2022:115-123].

When applied equitably, these efforts have significantly improved population health outcomes, demonstrating the effectiveness of utilitarian principles in public health policy formulation and implementation.

1.1.1.2 Promotes Equality

The utilitarian approach is based on the idea that everyone's interest should be considered equally, with not one person's happiness or wellbeing given more importance than another's. This means that decision-makers should aim to treat all individuals fairly and without bias. Focusing on the good for the greatest numbers, utility promotes decisions that benefit the entire population without favouring specific individuals or groups. Matti Häyry's [2021:341] work *Just Better Utilitarianism* encapsulates this affirmation succinctly in the following way: 'Utilitarianism could provide a basis for moral and political decisions and choices in bioethics and elsewhere [professional traditions like medicine].' Häyry [2021:351] points out in particular that decisions made in a variety of fields, including medicine and healthcare, are public. To ensure the survival and satisfaction of the health of one person at the expense of the many, the utility approach, for instance, would question the necessity of foregoing the distribution or allocation of medical and healthcare resources. Häyry argues that in societies with public services 'we do not have to go further than to the cost of some drugs for rare diseases, which can drain local medical and healthcare resources, causing major inconveniences to many.'

As such, in public health, utilitarianism can help make fair healthcare decisions. It considers everyone's needs equally so healthcare policies benefit everyone, not just a few. For example, when resources like vaccines or hospital beds are limited, utilitarianism prioritises strategies that help the most people, like vaccinating vulnerable groups or treating critical patients. This approach benefits society while promoting fair allocation of resources.

1.1.2 Limitations

1.1.2.1 Ignores Individual Autonomy and Dignity

Utilitarianism judges the morality of an action by how well it serves the common good and favours the extreme pleasure of pursuing the greatest happiness of the greatest number. This can come at a cost. Sometimes individual freedom and dignity may be sacrificed for the greater good. This raises concerns about the potential for the majority to override individual rights and compromise personal dignity. Logically, making the noblest acts not good in themselves but only useful means. In a way, when individuals are treated as mere means to achieve a large goal, their autonomy and dignity may be undermined [Beauchamp and Childress 1994].

For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, South Africa implemented one of the strictest lockdowns in the world starting in March 2020 [South African News 2020]. Movement was highly restricted, businesses were closed, and social gatherings were banned with an aim to reduce transmission and prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed. People entering the country or suspected of having COVID-19 were also forced into state quarantine facilities, and individuals had no choice over where they were quarantined or how long they stayed, sometimes in poor conditions. Citizens were confined to their homes, even for non-threatening activities like outdoor exercise or visiting family.

These measures reflect a utilitarian approach to public health but also raise ethical concerns, particularly about individual rights and freedoms such as the right to freedom of movement, assembly, and economic activity, individual autonomy, and dignity, as individuals had limited choice over their placement and duration of stay. The lockdown measures also disproportionately affected vulnerable populations, including refugees, asylum seekers, and those living in poverty, who may not have had access to adequate healthcare, sanitation, or economic support.

1.1.2.2 May not Prioritise the Vulnerable or Minority Groups

Beauchamp and Childress [1994:360] intone that utilitarianism can result in the tyranny of the majority, where the interests of the majority are prioritised over the vulnerable or those of minority groups. This means that utilitarianism can lead to the oppression of minority groups, where the needs and desires of the majority

override those of smaller groups, potentially leading to unfair treatment and disregard for their rights. They go further to expose the limitation of utilitarian ethics. They assert that it began with a focus on 'using time and resources efficiently in healthcare, without initially considering the broader public good.' However, 'it lacks mechanisms to address or prevent unfair social distribution' [Beauchamp and Childress:1994:360]. In effect, utilitarianism seems to permit the interests of the majority to override the rights of the minorities and, therefore, cannot adequately disavow unjust social distributions [Chukwuneke and Ezenwugo 2022:23].

For example, when the South African government implemented lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic to reduce transmission and protect public health, these measures had significant economic impacts. As can be noticed in the *Equality Research Brief* by the South African Human Rights Commission [2021:13], the adverse effects of lockdowns affected small businesses and vulnerable populations particularly. The report states that, 'in the context of economic hardship brought about by the pandemic and lockdown restrictions, accessing credit became crucial for the survival of minority-owned businesses.' The research also found that minority group entrepreneurs or small business owners were forced to close their businesses or significantly reduce operations, low-income workers were retrenched or faced reduced hours, and vulnerable populations struggled to access essential services or support like medical care [Human Rights Commission 2021:13]. From a utilitarian perspective, the measures of lockdowns might be justified if they reduce overall harm and save lives. This approach might prioritise the health of the majority over the economic well-being of marginalised groups.

The above scenario illustrates the trade-off between individual and collective interests and the complexity of decision-making in crises. The South African government faced difficult choices between protecting public health and mitigating economic harm, highlighting the need for nuanced and context-dependent decision-making. It also highlights the need to consider how benefits and burdens are distributed among different groups, ensuring that marginalised populations are not unfairly disadvantaged.

1.1.2.3 Can be used to Justify Harmful Actions

While utilitarianism aims to promote overall well-being, its potential to justify harmful actions raises significant ethical concerns. Utilitarians argue that rules allowing actions like euthanasia or withholding treatment should only be supported if they lead to the most beneficial overall outcomes. For example, the *trolley problem*, a classic thought experiment, illustrates the dilemma of diverting a runaway trolley from killing the "many" people onto a track where it will kill one person. For Beauchamp and Childress [1994], utilitarianism may justify sacrificing the one person to save the "many" people.

During Covid-19 epidemic, South Africa, like many other countries, faced significant healthcare challenges, including a shortage of ICU beds. This shortage became even more critical, forcing healthcare professionals to make difficult decisions about who receives care. The shortage of ICU beds, ventilators, and other essential medical equipment limited the ability to provide adequate care. Consequently, healthcare professionals had to make triage decisions, prioritising patients based on their 'likelihood of survival with acceptable quality of life and the most quality adjusted life year' [Morrow *et al*., 2020:1177]. Given these circumstances, Beauchamp and Childress [1994] argue that utilitarians may justify their actions of sacrificing the 'one person to save the many,' where the main criteria for such action would relate to 'function and comorbid conditions' [Morrow *et al*., 2020:1177].

While utilitarianism provides a clear principle to maximise overall happiness or minimise suffering often proves extremely difficult to apply in real-world situations due to difficulty in predicting outcomes. This means it would be hard to predict the outcomes of different actions and determine which one will lead to the greatest happiness. Based on this, Beauchamp and Childress [1994] argue that the policy or decision makers often lack complete information about the needs, preferences and circumstances of all individuals affected. They argue that utilitarianism is premised on two difficult conditions: Firstly, making value judgements about what constitutes happiness or well-being, which can be subjective and contentious. Secondly, requires sacrificing the individuals' rights or dignity for the greater good, which can be morally problematic.

1.2 Deontological Approach

Unlike the situation with utilitarianism, which starts with pain and pleasure and considers the consequences in deciding how to act morally, the point of departure for deontology – Kant's theory- is rather what your moral duty is [Kant 2002]. That is, to act morally, 'it is the rules that tell you what motive to act from and what you ought to do' [Stewart 2009:35].

1.2.1 Strengths

1.2.1.1 Respect for Autonomy and Dignity

Noel Stewart [2009:45] begins by noting that Kant's deontological approach has made it enduringly popular due to its benefits. 'It explains and justifies many of our ordinary moral thought processes, such as our tendency, when confronted by wrongdoing, to challenge the culprit by asking, what if everybody did that?' The universality test does a great job of capturing this typical response. As Stewart [2009:45] avows, Kant's assertion on the goodwill explains our intuitive belief that, when it comes to evaluating an action's moral worth, 'it is the thought that counts.' Furthermore, deontology 'is strong on respect for autonomy, human rights and human dignity' [Stewart 2009:45]. Respect for autonomy means recognising the individual's right to make decisions about their own lives and healthcare. While respect for dignity means treating individuals with dignity and worth, regardless of circumstances [Stewart 2009:45].

Unlike Utilitarianism, deontology prioritises respect for individual autonomy and dignity, safeguarding patients' rights and interests. It opposes, point-blank, sacrificing the rights of an individual in the name of promoting societal happiness. Its unwavering assertiveness to justice resonates deeply within everyone because justice is not negotiable and rules must not be bent to get a happy result [Stewart 2009:45]. Deontological ethics shines through in its insistence on the importance of informed decision making and consent to treat individuals as ends in themselves, rather than mere means to an end, promoting unconditional respect regardless of outcomes [Rachels and Rachels 2010:146].

A clear example is the case of informed consent in cancer treatment. Bansanta Kumar Nayak [2024:94] argues in the article *Deontological Approach to Resolve Problem in Medical Ethics* that in order for healthcare practitioners to make moral decisions, they need to adhere to certain obligations and rules. If healthcare practitioners are confronted with a particular case, where, for instance, a patient is diagnosed with cancer, the healthcare provider [oncologist] should consider discussing the available medical options with the patient to direct their decision-making process to necessitate a thorough examination of the principles of autonomy. The doctor should provide details about surgery, chemotherapy, radiation and potential side effects. Medical practitioners discuss potential outcomes, success rates and potential complications with the patient. The patient decides on a treatment plan that aligns with one's values and preferences, exercising autonomy. A medical practitioner respects patients' autonomy by supporting the patients' chosen plan. This entails a 'strict commitment to prioritise the significance of upholding individuals' autonomy and their entitlement to make decisions regarding their own health … and mandates healthcare practitioners to uphold patients' confidentiality and refrain from deliberately causing injury' [Nayak 2024:94-97].

Informed decision-making and consent process exemplifies respect for autonomy and dignity. Informed consent empowers individuals to make informed decisions about their health and access to treatment, which can significantly improve and protect the health outcomes and quality of life of most vulnerable populations.

1.2.1.2 Protection of Vulnerable Populations

Deontological ethics emphasises the importance of respecting human dignity, particularly for vulnerable populations, and prioritises the protection of vulnerable populations from harm, exploitation, and abuse. This means every person has inherent dignity and moral worth, regardless of their status, abilities, or situation. This includes vulnerable groups like children, the elderly, people with disabilities, or marginalised communities. It also argues that we have a moral duty to protect vulnerable populations, ensuring their safety and well-being, and these moral duties are universal and non-negotiable, so they apply equally to

everyone [Beauchamp and Childress 1994].

This implies that we are obligated to treat vulnerable individuals with the same level of respect, honesty, and fairness as anyone else by ensuring assent is obtained from parents or guardians before medical treatment for young children, that elderly people's autonomy and dignity are respected in care facilities and accessible healthcare services and accommodations for people with disabilities. By prioritising respect, dignity, and accessibility in care, healthcare providers can promote the well-being and quality of life of vulnerable populations.

If we take an example of a young child in South Africa who requires medical treatment for a serious illness. The child's parents are concerned about the treatment options and potential side effects. Healthcare providers ensure the parents understand the treatment options. The healthcare provider obtains assent from parents or guardians before medical treatment of a child. The healthcare provider prioritises the child's needs and comfort. This scenario demonstrates the importance of respecting the dignity and autonomy of children and their families in healthcare decision-making.

1.2.2 Limitations

Though the deontological approach seems attractive and good in that it acts as an antidote to hedonism with its serious and strict claims of duty, it exhibits certain difficulties, especially concerning three points: [1] Overemphasising law underemphasises relationships [2] the lack of regard for consequences, and [3] the limited consideration for culture and social context.

1.2.2.1 Problem of Overemphasising Law Over Relationships

Kant's moral theory focuses on obligations derived from universal moral principles and agreements and duties based on rational consent, and may not be the best approach for understanding moral relationships, particularly in personal and intimate contexts. This has been criticised for overemphasising rules and obligations while failing to capture the nuances and complexities of personal relationships. It has also been criticised for neglecting the importance of emotions, empathy, and care in relationships [Beauchamp & Childress 1994].

An example can be drawn from a scenario where a doctor has a close family member who is hospitalised in the same hospital where he works. According to Kant's moral theory, the doctor might prioritise their professional obligations and treat their family member with strict adherence to medical protocols. However, this approach might overlook the nuances of their personal relationship and the emotional needs of their family member. This example illustrates how deontological theory might not fully capture the complexities of personal relationships in healthcare, where emotional connections and individualised care can be essential.

1.2.2.2 Lack of Regard for Consequences

Beauchamp and Childress [1994] argue that deontology's focus on moral rules and principles can lead to a lack of consideration for the consequences of actions, which can result in harm or unintended consequences. According to Beauchamp and Childress, deontology judges actions based on whether they follow moral rules or duties, not on what happens as a result. This means an action can be considered morally "right" even if it leads to harmful or tragic consequences. In practice, consequences often matter deeply, especially in fields like medicine, law, or public policy. Ignoring outcomes can lead to rigid decisions that cause more harm than good, even when intentions are pure.

Austin Fagothey [1976:129] contends that it is unnatural and inhuman to base all morality on the motivation of duty. For him, Kant never claims that an action performed out of duty is immoral; rather, he merely states it is nonmoral. He also does not assert that an action must be performed out of pure duty to be moral. Summarising Kant's ideas, Fagothey notes 'unless the motive of duty is present, it cannot be moral, and if it is done from both duty and inclination, it is the motive of duty that gives it its morality.' Even this remark, according to Fagothey [1976:129], overplays the role of duty. Does the mother's commitment stem from her sense of duty or her love for her child? According to Fagothey, 'a sense of duty will be present in such a case, but love is always esteemed as a higher motive than mere duty and gives the act a greater mo-

ral worth. We fall back on duty only when other motives fail. Duty is rather the last bulwark against wrong acting than the highest motive for right acting.'

How may heroic acts like [1] telling the truth to following public health narrative can be explained by the deontological approach? David Misselbrook [medical doctor] [2013:211] explains, 'as the patient starts to drift off under anaesthetic to repair his critically ruptured aneurysm, he asks me, "will I be ok, doc?" Or the relative asks me, "did he suffer that much at the end?" Must I always tell nothing but the truth?' Misselbrook sees deontology as useless at triage. It cannot guarantee him which duties to prioritise over others, as all his duties are absolute. Or [2] giving one's life for one's friend. An example can be drawn from Wendy Lipworthy's article *Beyond Duty–Medical Heroes and the Covid-19 Pandemic*. Lipworthy [2020:723-727] explains that as soon as Covid-19 emerged, a narrative in the media appeared that stated, 'healthcare workers are marching to the "frontline" in the "war" against the virus and, in doing so, putting themselves at considerable risk' for the sake of saving other people's lives. These heroic healthcare workers everywhere in the world are now the subject of coordinated public applause. These acts are always thought to be the noblest and best precisely because they go beyond the call of duty, as in Lipworthy's assertion.

Deontology is then faced with this dilemma: either it must deny that heroic acts are moral, thus putting the best of human acts outside the pale of moral goodness; or it must make heroic acts a duty, thus putting a burden on human nature that it cannot bear and robbing these acts of the very quality that makes them heroic. These scenarios highlight the complexities of applying deontological principles, where adherence to moral rules or law can have significant consequences.

1.2.2.3 Limited Consideration for Culture and Social Context

Deontology's moral rules and principles can be limited in their consideration for cultural and social context, which can lead to difficulties in applying them in diverse settings. Deontological ethics emphasises universal moral laws that apply to all people, always, regardless of context. This, according to Chukwuneke and Ezenwugo [2022:21], can make it insensitive to cultural differences, traditions, or values that shape people's moral views in diverse societies.

In real life, people's decisions are often shaped by social roles, relationships, economic conditions, and historical context. Deontology's emphasis on abstract duties may overlook the impact of these lived experiences, especially for marginalised or oppressed groups. Diverse cultures may value different virtues or duties such as loyalty, honour, or community welfare, which might not align neatly with rigid deontological rules. Therefore, the lack of cultural flexibility can make deontology less practical or inclusive in global or multicultural contexts.

South Africa's emphasis on confidentiality in HIV testing may conflict with cultural practices that prioritise disclosure to family or community members. In some cultures, family or community members may be involved in healthcare decisions, including disclosure of HIV status or may prioritise collective well-being over individual autonomy, which may lead to disclosure of HIV status to family or community members. In this case, healthcare providers may need to balance individual rights to confidentiality with cultural practices that prioritise disclosure. Therefore, healthcare providers should strive to provide culturally sensitive care that respects individual rights while acknowledging cultural differences [Beachamp and Childress 1994].

2. Evaluating Virtue Ethics Against Utility and Deontology

2.1 Virtue Ethics in Theory

One approach to transcending the opposition between utilitarianism and deontology is to adopt a more nuanced and context-dependent approach to bioethics and medicine to achieve excellent ends. The word "excellence", which is translated as "virtue," is defined by Aristotle [2000:1106a] as 'the state of character or disposition… that brings both that of which it is the virtue into a good condition and causes the work be-

longing to that thing to be done well.' Aristotle [2000:1107a] further clarifies that 'virtue is a characteristic marked by choice, residing in the mean relative to us, a characteristic defined by reason and as the prudent person would define it.' In simpler terms, Thomas Aquinas [*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 59, art 1] condenses the definition to: 'Virtue is a habit of choosing the mean appointed by reason as a prudent man would appoint it' to discern his actions between the extremes of excess and deficiency in action. For Aristotle, the mean [as already noted above] is not absolute but 'relative to us,' for what is the right amount for one would be too much or too little for another. A generous gift from a poor man would be a stingy one from a rich man. But how then do we attain the good?

The standard by which the mean of the moral virtues is determined is the intellectual virtue of prudence. Aristotle [2000:1107a] contends that in order to attain good actions, one should be aware that virtues do not naturally proceed from human nature but are built on human nature through training. In consonance with Aristotle's perspective, Koali *et al*. [2024:19] add:

> *human character is developed through repeated acts that transmute into habits that permanently cause a moral agent to act persistently; it is logical to infer that character is a product of voluntary repeated human acts. Those who frequently act or say unjust things often develop unjust character.*

In this instance, an unjust character is not determined, but people deliberately choose to develop such unacceptable characters. Mostly because they believe that their unjust methods are justified by the outcomes. Koali *et al.* [2024:79] demonstrate that 'good judgement emanates from good character… being a good person is not about seeking to follow formal rules but an exhibition of moral character traits.' But what traits of character should individuals be encouraged to possess?

In their book *The Elements of Moral Philosophy,* James Rachels and Stuart Rachels [2010:160-164] provide a partial list of traits*,* including benevolence, conscientiousness, prudence, loyalty to friends and family, justice, courage, and so forth. They argue that while it is one thing to say that we should be benevolent in general, it is quite another to specify what these character traits entail. Nevertheless, they conclude that each of them has unique characteristics and presents unique issues. For example, 'courage is a mean between the extremes of cowardice and foolhardiness; generosity, which is the willingness to expend one's resources to help others, is the mean between stinginess and extravagance…' However, this begs the question of why people should possess virtues. Thomas Aquinas responds as follows:

> *... for the need of putting the order of reason into the passions due to their thwarting reason; and this occurs in two ways. First, when the passions incite to something against reason, and then they need a curb, which we thus call temperance. Second, when the passions withdraw us from following the dictate of reason, for instance, through fear of danger or toil, and then man needs to be strengthened for that which reason dictates, lest he turn back, and to this end there is fortitude [Summa Theologiae, I-II, q. 61, art 2].*

In addition, Rachels and Rachels [2010:165-166] spell out that virtues are important in their own respect. Courage is good for coping with danger; generosity is desirable as there are always people needing help; honesty and not lying are needed to safeguard relations, and loyalty is needed for dependence.

In summary, it may be true that different communities view virtues differently and count certain behaviours as satisfying them. One could argue that the value of the character trait varies from person to person and from society to society. However, it is incorrect to claim that societal norms dictate whether a certain character trait of a person is a virtue. Virtues are required not by custom but by facts about our shared human existence.

2.2 Arguments Against Virtue Ethics

Virtues, according to critics, are a subject better suited for novelists than ethicists. For instance, Bonnie Steinbock [2013:36] contends that there is no way to organise and categorise the various, unspecified, and potentially contradicting virtues. Beyond claims that virtues lack independent action-guiding content, their limited specificity raises concerns about their ability to influence actions. In the same line, Justin Oakley

[1994:94] claims that, 'a virtue ethics criterion of rightness is less precisely specifiable and less easily applicable' than certain other approaches. According to Robert Louden [1984:229],

> *we would anticipate 'a very limited amount of advice on moral dilemmas… from the virtue-oriented approach due to the intrinsic nature of virtue. Naturally, we ought to do what the virtuous person would do, yet it is not always easy to fathom what the hypothetical moral exemplar would do if he were in our position.*

Another critique levelled against virtue ethics is that good or virtuous people can act wrongly and do bad things [Oakley 1998]. According to Steinbock [2013:36], 'neither a settled motivational structure nor guidance from the virtues themselves, including prudence, may be sufficient to preclude wrong actions.' Steinbock [2013:36] continues, 'indeed even if an agent's motivation is virtuous, certain dominant virtues may lead him or her to act wrongly. For example, a caregiver's virtue of benevolence may lead her to find active euthanasia acceptable for a particular patient, even though that patient is not able to speak completely for himself.'

2.3 Applicability of Virtue Ethics in Bioethics and Medicine

Questions are raised concerning whether virtue ethics is sufficiently comprehensive and a viable substitute approach in bioethics and in professional traditions like medicine. Is it possible that virtue ethics can guide actions given their limited specificability?

Firstly, proponents of virtue ethics would characterise it as 'an integrated whole and unity' [Steinbock 2013:37]. This suggests that virtue ethics may include elements from both utilitarianism and deontology. By integrating consequentialist aspects from utilitarianism, it recognises the importance of promoting overall well-being and happiness. Meanwhile, incorporating deontological principles emphasises the necessity of upholding moral rules and principles, such as autonomy and non-maleficence [Rachels and Rachels 2010:181]. Virtue ethics can prioritise promoting the common good, recognising the interconnectedness of individuals and communities. Virtues can also help balance individual interests with collective interests, promoting a more equitable and just society.

Unlike utilitarianism and deontology approaches, whose central question is what "I ought to do" in various circumstances, focusing on actions and looking particularly at consequences of actions, the central questions of virtue ethics are: 'What is the good life for me as a human being… what kind of person should I want to become… and how do I achieve both of these goals?' [Stewart 2009:57]. Virtues posited as 'dispositions' [Aristotle 2000:1105b–1106b] are important because they focus on cultivating positive character traits like compassion and fairness. They enable agents to adhere to moral principles instead of just following rules or considering the outcome of actions. Such that, 'whatever deeds arise in accord with the virtues are not done justly or moderately if they are merely in a certain state, but only if one who does those deeds is in a certain state as well' [Aristotle 2000: 1105a–1105b]. William Frankena [1973:36], therefore, concludes that 'principles without virtues are impotent.'

Virtues also transcend the focus on consequences, considering that moral decisions involve more than just calculating outcomes. According to Edmund Pellegrino [1995:266], virtue ethics can integrate care ethics to provide a more comprehensive moral framework. He asserts that 'professional ethics offers the possibility of some agreement on a telos–that is, an end and a good, which, in the case of the relationship between the healthcare professional and the patient, would be the good of the patient.' From the clinical relationship with its telos of healing, Pellegrino develops a list of virtues: fidelity to trust and promise, benevolence, effacement of self-interest, compassion and caring, intellectual honesty, justice, and prudence [Pellegrino 1995:268].

In a clinical scenario, A 75-year-old woman with advanced dementia and a serious infection is hospitalised. She can no longer communicate clearly, and her family members disagree on what treatment approach should be taken. Some family members want to pursue aggressive treatment, while others believe that comfort care is more appropriate. The doctor decides to apply a virtue ethics approach to this complex situation. The doctor prioritises the patient's autonomy and dignity by listening to the patient's values, even though the patient cannot communicate effectively; her family shares her values and preferences with the doctor. The doctor

considers the patient's physical, emotional, and social well-being, including her pain, comfort, and quality of life. The doctor also engages in open and empathetic discussions with the patient's family, acknowledging their concerns and values. This demonstrates the doctor's compassion and empathy towards the patient and her family, recognising the emotional toll of this decision. Through careful and context-dependent decision-making, the doctor works with the patient's family to develop a care plan that prioritises her comfort, dignity, and well-being. They decide to focus on palliative care, ensuring that the patient receives adequate pain management and emotional support. The above scenario demonstrates how virtue ethics can be applied in medical decision-making to prioritise patient autonomy, dignity, and well-being. By engaging in careful and context-dependent decision-making, healthcare professionals can develop care plans that respect patients' values and promote their overall well-being.

Given that there is no virtue corresponding to respect for patients' autonomy, critics would question if Pellegrino's list and, by extension, virtue ethics in general, condones and encourages excessive professional paternalism. Pellegrino's list of virtues, though not all inclusive are 'most essential to the healing purposes of the clinical encounters' [Pellegrino 1995:268]. There is a mutual reciprocal reinforcement among these many virtues. Consequently, if one were compromised, the other would also be compromised, making a priority ranking impossible [Steinbock 2013:37]. An approach based on virtue might address euthanasia, for example, by highlighting the significance of character and particular virtues in relation to the end method acknowledged.

Philippa Foot investigates the moral feasibility of several forms of euthanasia from the perspective of the end of the virtues. He argues that charity, for example, as the virtue of 'attachments to the good of others,' can support the act of euthanasia since, for its very meaning, it seeks 'one's death for his own sake–for his good' [Foot 1977:106]. However, justice as a virtue opposes and sometimes allows euthanasia. Justice, for instance, supports active voluntary euthanasia, may tolerate non-voluntary passive euthanasia, and opposes involuntary active euthanasia [Steinbock 2013:38]. Yet, justice strongly opposes active euthanasia because, according to Aristotle's rationale, justice is 'a complete virtue, not without qualification, but in relation to another person' [Aristotle 2000:1130a]. For Aristotle, it is complete virtue in the fullest sense for two reasons: first of all, it is the 'actual exercise of perfect virtue' – practice what is right – which is not to harm another – therefore not to kill. It is also complete because 'he who possesses it can exercise his virtue in relation to another person' [Aristotle 2000:1130a]. For this reason, virtue ethics is the greatest of the approaches for the end that virtue aims at in another's interest or good.

Secondly, the limited specificity of virtues raises additional concerns about their power to direct behaviours. Proponents of virtue ethics argue that virtue provides more guidance for action than other theorists often recognise. According to Rosalind Hursthouse [2003], a virtue ethicist herself, the assertion that 'virtue ethics does not and cannot provide guidance the way utilitarianism and deontology do' is a significant misunderstanding that dominates much of the current discussions over ethical theory and methodology. Hursthouse counters this misunderstanding, saying;

> *Virtue ethics provides a specification of right actions– as what a virtuous agent [person] would, characteristically, do in the circumstances– and such a specification can be regarded as generating several moral rules or principles [contrary to the usual claim that virtue ethics does not come up with rules or principles]. Each virtue [for example, justice, charity, and so on] generates an instruction– do what is honest or just, do what is charitable, and each vice a prohibition– do not … do what is dishonest, uncharitable [Hursthouse 2001:17].*

In addition to the response to concerns about virtue ethics' capacity for action guidance, Hursthouse further argues that the goal should not be 'to provide a decision procedure which any reasonably clever adolescent could apply [without moral wisdom or discernment].' [Hursthouse 2001:18]. Virtue ethics may try to specify the virtues and to distinguish merely apparent from real dilemmas, a task that presupposes moral wisdom and discernment. Sometimes, however, irresolvable and tragic dilemmas remain. However, Steinbock [2013:36] acknowledges that virtue ethics might illustrate how the agent should react, that is, with suitable attitudes and feelings, such as grief and guilt, even though action direction is impossible in such circumstances.

Considering the discussion above, it can be observed that virtue ethics, unlike utility and deontology, is an essential approach in biomedical ethics research. Being 'an agent–centred moral approach, it disposes of a moral agent [person] to tenaciously exhibit virtuous acts in all morally demanding circumstances… to strive to maintain integrity so that consistency, honesty, and objectivity prevail' [Koali *et al*., 2024:80]. More specifically, virtue ethics seeks to promote and emphasise the development of moral values and character. It is concerned with the doer, the person or agent behind the actions, not so much with the actions themselves. It is not that virtue theorists do not care what actions are performed. It is that they think getting the person right is the most important thing, and once you have done this, good actions will follow automatically. Make the apple tree good, and you will get good apples.

Conclusion

Navigating the complexities of bioethics and medicine requires a deep understanding of competing moral frameworks, including utilitarianism and deontology. Both theories offer valuable insights but also present significant challenges when applied to real-world scenarios. Utilitarianism is praised for its focus on maximising overall happiness and well-being, and its emphasis on equality. However, it is criticised for potentially ignoring individual autonomy and dignity, favouring the majority over minority groups, and not prioritising the most vulnerable populations. Moreover, utilitarianism can justify harmful actions if they lead to a greater good and can be challenging to apply in practice due to difficulties in measuring and comparing individual happiness or well-being. Deontology, on the other hand, is valued for its respect for autonomy and dignity, protection of vulnerable populations, and promotion of trust and integrity. Nonetheless, it faces criticism for overemphasising law over relationships, its lack of consideration for consequences and limited consideration for cultural and social context. Given the limitations of both approaches, a more nuanced and context-dependent approach to biomedical ethics might be necessary. Virtue ethics offers a potential framework for transcending the opposition between utilitarianism and deontology. By focusing on the development of good character traits such as compassion, honesty, and fairness, virtue ethics can help healthcare professionals navigate complex moral situations and balance competing concerns. It integrates elements of both consequentialist and deontological considerations, promoting moral development and growth while recognising the importance of context and relationships.

In conclusion, while both utilitarianism and deontology provide essential insights into biomedical ethics, a balanced approach that incorporates the strengths of both theories and addresses their limitations is crucial. Virtue ethics, with its emphasis on character development and contextual decision-making, offers a promising avenue for achieving this balance and guiding ethical decision-making in healthcare. By adopting a more nuanced and adaptable approach, healthcare professionals can better navigate the complexities of biomedical ethics and make decisions that respect individual dignity, promote overall well-being, and uphold moral principles.

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Human Dignity and the Future of Personhood in AI-Integrated Brain-Computer Interfaces.

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Abstract

The advancements in neurotechnology, especially brain-computer interface (BCI) technologies, signal an ethically challenging phase in the relationship between human beings and artificial intelligence. The boundaries between 'purely biological cognition' and machine intelligence continue to blur. The current objectives of tech giants such as Neuralink are primarily therapeutic, focusing on restoring communication and neurological functions. However, future developments may enable direct integration between the human brain and AI-integrated BCIs such as generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) systems through implantable brain chips or other devices. This will create new possibilities for cognitive enhancement, expanded memory, accelerated learning, and augmented decision-making. This conceptual paper critically examines the ethical implications of AI-integrated brain enhancement from the perspective of human personhood and dignity. Although the ethical implications of brain-computer interfaces have received growing scholarly attention, much of the existing literature has concentrated on issues such as safety, privacy, cybersecurity, regulation, and informed consent. Comparatively less philosophical attention has been devoted to examining AI-integrated cognitive enhancement through the combined lenses of personhood, human dignity, and relational understandings of the human person. The paper argues that the shift from therapeutic neurotechnology to human enhancement raises fundamental questions about the nature of human agency, autonomy, identity, and responsibility in an age where cognitive processes may increasingly involve technological mediation. It is crucial to consider whether AI-enhanced cognition represents an authentic extension of human capacities or a transformation that risks undermining essential dimensions of human personhood. Will AI-integrated brain enhancement support the conventional understanding of human personhood, or will it transform the very meaning of being human? Drawing on existing literature in technoethics, neurotechnology, and philosophy of technology, the study argues that the ethical evaluation of BCI technologies should not be determined solely by technological capability or efficiency, but by their capacity to preserve human dignity, meaningful autonomy, and responsible self-determination. As humanity moves towards deeper integration with artificial intelligence, the central ethical challenge lies beyond whether humans can enhance themselves through neural technologies. It is primarily centred on interrogating whether such enhancement can be pursued in ways that safeguard the distinctive value, freedom, and dignity of the human person. By integrating the extended mind hypothesis, the transformation hypothesis, human dignity, and *Ubuntu*, the paper proposes a normative framework for evaluating future AI-integrated neurotechnologies.

Keywords: Neuralink, brain–computer interfaces, generative artificial intelligence, personhood, enhancement, human dignity, autonomy.

Introduction

Brain-computer interface (BCI) technologies mark a crucial step in the evolving relationship between human beings and artificial intelligence. Wander and Rao [2014] and Mouazen and El Bouyed [2025] understand brain-computer interface as any technology that enables the human brain to communicate directly with a computer or other electronic device by converting neural signals into actionable commands. Current BCIs such as those being developed by the Neuralink Corporation are primarily used to help people with neurological disorders or physical disabilities, such as paralysis, spinal cord injuries, stroke, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), regain communication, mobility, or independence [Wander and Rao 2014]. For example, Neuralink Corporation [2026], an American neurotechnology company developing implantable brain-computer interfaces, notes that:

> *Our brain-computer interface translates neural signals into actions. In our clinical trials, people are using Neuralink devices to control computers and robotic arms with their thoughts. This technology will restore autonomy to those with unmet medical needs and unlock new dimensions of human potential.*

Current ambitions of brain-computer interface technologies such as Neuralink are primarily therapeutic, as they aim at restoring communication and neurological function for people with paralysis or severe disability [Reuters 2023; Mchia 2023; Neuralink Corporation 2026]. However, the longer-term vision may include the possibility that such devices may in the near future, connect the human brain directly to future AI-integrated BCIs. This will enhance cognitive abilities, expand memory, accelerate learning, and impart AI-assisted creativity and decision-making. Beyond technical and medical concerns, this shift raises fundamental philosophical questions regarding what it means to be human. For example, the shift challenges the traditional or conventional definitions of human dignity, autonomy, personhood, privacy, and social justice.

Regarding the computer-human interfaces, Livanis et al. [2024] argue that among the central ethical issues are "human dignity, personhood and autonomy," along with safety, stigma, discrimination, privacy, security, and responsibility. Such concerns become even more pressing when BCI technology moves beyond restoration toward enhancement. For instance, if neural devices are used not merely to compensate for disability or paralysis but to augment ordinary cognition, then the question is no longer only what humans can do with technology, but what humans may become. In that sense, the ethical significance of BCIs such as future implantable neural interfaces lies in their potential to redefine human personhood itself. AI integration can either be perceived as a continuation of human evolution and an expansion of human capacities (extended mind hypothesis) or as a process that alters the very definition of being human (transformation hypothesis). These perspectives should not be understood as mutually exclusive but as complementary analytical frameworks for evaluating different dimensions of AI-integrated neurotechnology. The tension is apparent when BCIs are described as technologies that connect "the human brain to a machine that is external to the brain and the source of the self," thereby implicating not just function but the very definition of selfhood [Mchia 2023:982].

In the age where thought itself becomes increasingly technologically mediated, it is crucial to rethink traditional accounts of autonomy and moral responsibility. Based on the highlighted dilemma, this paper interrogates whether AI-integrated brain enhancement will extend human personhood or transform it. From the perspective of contemporary neuroethics, this paper does not simply focus on safety or efficacy, but on the need to rethink how meaningful autonomy and human dignity can be preserved. In 2021, UNESCO warned that neurotechnology innovations must be approached with careful attention to human rights and ethical governance. For instance, a purely instrumental account of BCIs such as future implantable neural interfaces that measures success only by speed, efficiency, or intelligence may not adequately address deeper philosophical questions. Accordingly, this paper advances three related arguments. Firstly, AI-integrated BCIs can plausibly be understood as an extension of humanity's long history of technological self-enhancement. Secondly, the increasing integration of artificial intelligence into human cognition simultaneously creates genuine risks of transforming personhood, agency, and authenticity. Thirdly, because neither technological optimism nor technological pessimism adequately resolves these tensions, human dignity, understood within both universal human rights discourse and the African relational philosophy of *Ubuntu*, provides the most appropriate ethical framework for evaluating future developments in neurotechnology [Igbalumun & Mutelo

2025]. Given the rate at which BCIs are developing, the question is no longer whether humans can enhance themselves through neural technologies. Rather, the main question is whether such enhancement can be pursued in ways that safeguard the distinctive value, freedom, and dignity of the human person.

1. Extended Mind Hypothesis and AI-Augmented Intelligence

The main question regards whether AI-integrated enhancement actually represents an extension of human personhood. Is AI-integrated enhancement a continuation of humanity's long history of extending its capacities through technology? The extended mind hypothesis, originally formulated by Clark and Chalmers (1998), suggests that cognition may extend beyond the biological brain into appropriately integrated external artefacts. This is because human cognition is not confined to the physical brain but actively incorporates external tools [Garza-Herrera 2024; Mihić Zidar et al. 2026]. Historically, human beings have always operated with specific 'tools' that have shaped the very definition of thinking, remembering, creating and calculating. Garza-Herrera [2024] notes that "One of the defining characteristics of human evolution is the use of instruments. From the earliest stone tools to the most advanced artificial intelligence (AI)-powered devices, tools have assisted humans in surviving, thriving, and shaping the world around us."

In that sense, human beings have never been 'purely biological' in the sense of operating without the support of any form of tool. The fact that brain–computer interfaces "enable direct communication between the brain and external computers" makes them a new stage in the age-old pattern of technological augmentation [Gordon and Seth 2024]. In that sense, AI-enabled neurotechnologies are not an unexpected intervention in human history since it echoes the familiar use of artefacts to transcend biological limitations. For example, writing does not merely record thought but extends external memory beyond the fragile limits of the individual brain. Similarly, the internet extends human access to knowledge, enabling one to retrieve, compare, and distribute information at a scale no mind could manage. In their work on the digital expansion of the mind, Marsh and Rajaram [2019] and Yamashiro and Roediger III [2019] argue that internet use changes how people remember and process information. Their position demonstrates how cognition is already deeply entangled with external systems of storage and retrieval.

Just as books expand memory and the internet expands access to knowledge, AI-linked brain implants can be perceived as the next step in this continuum. It permeates the boundary between internal cognition and external assistance through enhancement. From this perspective, the question shifts from whether technology affects human cognition to whether AI-integrated enhancement simply intensifies a long-standing pattern of human self-extension [Gilbert et al. 2023; Mchia 2023]. If writing, books, the internet, and smartphones are cognitive partners, then linking the human brain directly to future generations of AI-enabled neural interfaces such as implanted brain chips may be seen as a more intimate version of the same phenomenon. Based on the extended mind hypothesis, BCIs would be seen as supplementing human intelligence just like calculators extend arithmetic ability without abolishing human reasoning. Gruica [2025:89] recognises that these systems are increasingly about more than medical restoration, since they may also involve "the potential for human enhancement and human-AI symbiosis." Thus, the main question is whether such augmentation enhances human agency or merely redistributes the way it is exercised. What if instead of imagining future generations of AI-enabled neural interfaces as a competitor to human thought, we view it as a tool for co-thinking that helps with recalling, pattern recognition, creative brainstorming, and providing decision-making support?

From the perspective of human–AI collaboration, Garcia-Barrios [2025:7] questions whether intelligent systems are "epistemic partners or cognitive crutches," emphasising that the long-term value of AI depends on whether it supports critical thinking and ethical agency rather than displacing them. Applied to AI-enabled neurotechnologies, this entails that AI should be understood as a partner in cognition rather than a replacement for the human mind [Pugh et al. 2018]. It can function as an external resource that enlarges memory, expands access to information, and accelerates learning without necessarily overriding human interpretation, judgment, and responsibility. But is technology that enhances reasoning, creativity, and memory simply expanding existing human potential? Based on the extended mind hypothesis, the AI-integrated brain

enhancement is only a more sophisticated instance of human development. If BCI technologies can restore lost capacities, disabilities or paralysis, they can also plausibly augment existing ones [Garcia-Barrios 2025; Garza-Herrera 2024; Mihić Zidar et al. 2026].

In that sense, enhancement should be regarded as a technologically mediated expression of human striving toward fuller realisation rather than loss of humanity. However, this optimistic reading of BCIs from the perspective of the extended mind hypothesis requires caution because technological extension cannot always be regarded as neutral. This is because every enhancement reshapes what users become accustomed to doing for themselves and what they outsource to machines. At the same time, the foregoing discussion emphasised that human personhood has always been dynamic, relational, and tool-mediated [Garza-Herrera 2024; Mihić Zidar et al. 2026]. On that basis, AI-integrated brain enhancement may be regarded as an extension of human personhood. This is partly because technology has historically functioned as a means through which humans transcend biological limitations and reimagine the scope of their own capacities. The table below demonstrates the progression.

Stage	Development	Implication
Technological extension	Tools such as writing, books and the internet extend human cognitive capacities.	Cognition is not limited to the biological brain.
AI augmentation	AI and BCIs extend memory, reasoning, creativity and access to information.	Human intelligence can be technologically enhanced.
Human–AI collaboration	AI functions as a cognitive partner rather than simply a tool.	Agency may be redistributed rather than eliminated.
Cognitive dependence	Increasing reliance on AI may shift what humans retain or outsource to machines.	Technological extension is not necessarily neutral.
Extension of personhood	AI-integrated BCIs represent a more intimate form of human technological self-extension.	Personhood may be extended without necessarily being transformed.
Theoretical limit	The extended mind explains cognitive extension but not deeper changes to identity and selfhood.	The transformation hypothesis is needed to examine possible ontological change.

While the extended mind hypothesis clearly demonstrates that human cognition has historically evolved through technological mediation, it cannot by itself resolve the deeper philosophical concerns raised by direct AI integration into human cognition. The hypothesis explains how technologies extend cognitive capacities without responding adequately to whether increasingly intimate technological integration might alter identity, authenticity, or the very meaning of personhood. These unresolved questions require a complementary perspective such as the transformation hypothesis, which is capable of examining not merely cognitive extension but possible ontological transformation.

2. Transformation Hypothesis and Personhood

The transformation hypothesis provides a progressive account of how increasingly intimate AI-human integration may alter conventional understandings of personhood [Goering et al. 2021; Kögel et al. 2019]. The evolution can be understood across several stages, beginning with cognitive enhancement and potentially culminating in a technologically mediated or co-constituted conception of the human person, as summarised in the table below.

Stage	Transformation	Implication for Personhood
Cognitive enhancement	AI enhances memory, reasoning and creativity.	The person becomes cognitively augmented.
Cognitive dependence	Human thinking increasingly relies on AI.	Autonomy may become uncertain.
Identity and authenticity	AI-mediated cognition affects memory, intentions and decisions.	The boundaries of self and authentic thought become blurred.
Privacy and agency	Neural data and mental processes become technologically accessible.	Mental privacy and agency become vulnerable.
Technologically mediated personhood	Human and AI cognition become deeply integrated.	Personhood may become hybrid and technologically co-constituted.
Transformation	Technology reshapes cognition, identity and self-understanding.	The question shifts from *what technology does to persons* to *what kind of person emerges*.

The transformation hypothesis notes that sufficiently intimate technological integration may not simply extend human cognition but fundamentally alter the ontology of personhood [Sample et al. 2019; Kögel et al. 2019]. The transformation hypothesis emphasises that deeper AI integration may not simply enhance the human person but that the traditional understandings of identity, consciousness, and selfhood may be transformed or altered [Goering et al. 2021; Kögel et al. 2019]. While cognition may become faster or more efficient when integrated with future AI-enabled BCIs through implanted brain chips, human thought may become partially dependent on artificial systems in ways that change how memory, reasoning, and agency are experienced. This explains why Sample et al. [2019] conclude that "the development of neural technologies raises important questions about the concept of personhood and its role in society." From the perspective of the transformation hypothesis, the main questions concern the kind of person who emerges through technologically mediated cognition, rather than simply the impact of technology on the person. This is because the boundary between human thought and machine-generated cognition becomes blurred.

If the brain chip developed by companies such as Neuralink Corporation helps the human brain to receive prompts, suggestions, or memory retrieval through future AI-integrated BCIs, then the line between what originates in the person and what is supplied externally may become difficult to distinguish. In their ethical commentary on neurotechnologies, Goering et al. [2021] argue that BCI technologies raise questions about "human identity, authenticity and agency". Prospective AI-integrated BCIs may intervene in the very processes by which an individual forms judgments and intentions. This can lead to total internal dependence because an individual might end up relying on the inbuilt future AI-enabled BCIs for memory recall, deliberation, creativity and decision-making support. If this happens, then nothing can stop human cognition itself from being reconfigured around artificial mediation.

From the perspective of the transformation hypothesis, this raises an important question about human identity [Sample et al. 2019]. Is the person still the same if memory and reasoning are technologically modified? While personal identity can be affected by education, traumatic experiences, relationships, or even the acquisition of new tools, neurotechnologies are likely to alter identity in a more radical sense by intervening in the cognitive processes through which continuity of self is maintained. Yuste et al. [2017:159] argue that AI and BCIs must "respect and preserve people's privacy, identity, agency and equality." If technology can edit, extend, or outsource memory and reasoning through future GenAI-empowered implanted brain chips, then the self is no longer simply acting with tools but is actually being partially assembled through them.

Another question may be raised from the perspective of authenticity. Are AI-assisted thoughts genuinely 'ours'? The question is whether a thought is original and the person can meaningfully endorse it as their own. If future AI-enabled BCIs through implanted brain chips completes our sentences, suggests our conclusions, or anticipates our relations, then thought itself may become a collaborative event between brain and machine. According to Sample et al. [2019], neurotechnology may help or harm depending on how it is designed and governed, and therefore should be understood through "the impact of BCIs on what it means to

be a person and to be recognised as such by others." The argument is crucial because authenticity is not only inwardly felt but also must be socially recognised. If someone whose cognition has been enhanced through future AI-enabled BCIs such as brain chips is perceived as less autonomous, accountable, or authentic, then the social meaning of personhood changes as well.

Privacy concerns primarily sharpen these questions. UNESCO [2025] states that "neurotechnology also raises serious ethical concerns - especially as it can access and manipulate brain activity, revealing personal information about identity, emotions, and thoughts. When combined with artificial intelligence, it poses risks to human dignity, autonomy, and mental privacy." BCIs might lead to the hacking of a human brain, which, apart from being an ethical concern, remains a genuine cybersecurity and medical risk. Because future AI-integrated BCIs are likely to rely heavily on wireless communication protocols, they will remain vulnerable to the same exploits as any other connected Internet of Things (IoT) device.

Let us imagine a scenario where a hacker takes complete control of an individual's mind and reads his or her private thoughts through a brain chip. This is linked to the notion of brainjacking, which "refers to the exercise of unauthorised control of another's electronic brain implant" [Pugh et al. 2018:219]. The ethical concern of intercepting thoughts or changing therapeutic brain stimulation is crucial because neurotechnology has already moved closer to the formation of thought itself [Pugh et al. 2018; Garza-Herrera 2024; Mihić Zidar et al. 2026]. If that happens, then the inner self becomes technologically decipherable, vulnerable, and potentially exposed. In that case, personhood is transformed by the possibility of external access to mental life. For this reason, the main question the transformation hypothesis asks is whether integrating artificial intelligence through BCIs into cognition creates a new form of technologically mediated personhood.

Neurotechnologies such as AI-integrated brain enhancement do not simply sit beside the person as neutral tools, but actually enter the domain of memory, intention, identity, and self-recognition. Sample et al. [2019] argue that "the hopes and fears associated with BCIs can be productively understood in terms of personhood." Rather than simply enhancing the human person, future AI-enabled BCIs such as implanted brain chips may transform conventional understandings of identity, consciousness, and selfhood. The foregoing discussion does not mean that the transformation hypothesis is necessarily anti-technology. Rather, it emphasises that enhancement redefines what counts as human agency, what is experienced as authentic thought, and how the self is imagined in relation to machines [Yuste et al. 2017; Pugh et al. 2018]. Perceiving AI-integrated cognition as normal also involves understanding the human person as hybrid and technologically co-constituted rather than being biologically 'purely human'. This also means interrogating whether the transformed self can still be recognised as a dignified, responsible, and free person.

3. Human Dignity as the Ethical Measure

The extended mind and transformation hypotheses help to understand what neurotechnologies such as those being developed by Neuralink may do to human capacities and self-understanding [Pugh et al. 2018; Garza-Herrera 2024]. The question now regards the major ethical standard by which those changes or transformations should be judged. Human dignity provides an appealing normative framework. This is because the central concern is whether AI-enhanced cognition remains compatible with the intrinsic worth of the human person. UNESCO [2025] states this plainly: "neurotechnology can alter the brain and mind in deep ways, so human rights and the intrinsic value of each person must be protected." From that perspective, we argue that technological progress should not be self-justifying but that it must be ordered toward the protection and flourishing of people. The importance of human dignity lies in the fact that it distinguishes enhancing humans as free persons from redesigning humans as optimised biological machines.

The preceding discussion demonstrates that neither the extended mind hypothesis nor the transformation hypothesis offers a sufficient ethical standard for evaluating AI-integrated brain enhancement. The extended mind hypothesis primarily explains why technological enhancement may be regarded as a continuation of human development. However, this understanding risks overlooking the deeper ethical implications of incre-

asingly human-machine integration. The transformation hypothesis rightly emphasises threats to identity and authenticity, though it somehow encourages excessive technological pessimism by treating transformation itself as ethically problematic. What is required is therefore a normative framework capable of evaluating enhancement without either celebrating or rejecting it in advance. Human dignity should be at the centre because it shifts ethical evaluation away from technological capability towards the intrinsic worth of the human person. Though technologies may reshape the expression of personhood, the intrinsic moral worth that grounds human dignity ought to remain unaltered.

One of the major concerns with AI-integrated brain enhancement regards the possibility of algorithms influencing personal decisions, thereby diluting the very basis of individual identity, autonomy and thought [UNESCO 2025; Miller et al., 2023]. With advancements in neurotechnologies, human beings should not be downgraded to the recipients of machine optimisation, as this has an impact on the very definition of human dignity. If not carefully integrated, AI-integrated enhancement may reduce human worth to measurable outputs such as intelligence, speed, memory, or efficiency. Yet, human dignity is deeper than cognitive performance. The German Ethics Council [2023] warns that "the use of AI must foster human flourishing, not diminish it…Artificial intelligence cannot substitute human intelligence, responsibility, or judgment." The caution is relevant because tech giants which promise faster learning, expanded memory, and improved decision-making can easily seduce society into treating the enhanced mind as a superior one.

Considering dignity as a measure involves not only asking whether AI makes us more efficient, but also the extent to which it actually helps us become more fully human. This is crucial because there is a difference between enhancing and redesigning a person. While enhancement focuses on supporting the person's capacity, redesigning a person as an optimised machine has ethical implications because it involves measuring one's worth based on what can be computed, accelerated, or controlled. As the Australian Catholic University [2026] states, "artificial intelligence should serve genuine human purposes rather than redefining what it means to be human." Although AI-integrated brain enhancement may increase cognitive power, if this involves subtly shifting the criteria of human worth from dignity to utility, then it risks becoming anthropologically deforming rather than morally enriching.

As an ethical measure, human dignity is directly linked to human flourishing. In their work on AI and flourishing, Barravecchio and Hajduk [2024] argue that advanced technologies are ethically defensible only "to the extent that they promote the genuine flourishing of human beings in a just fashion." In that sense, the legitimacy of BCIs, including implanted brain chips, does not primarily depend on whether they change, improve or enhance human beings. Rather, their legitimacy primarily depends on whether those changes, improvements or enhancements preserve the dignity and intrinsic value of the human person. For example, a technology that expands memory or increases productivity while weakening agency and diminishing responsibility would fail this test. AI-enhanced cognition should therefore serve human flourishing rather than redefine humanity based on technological standards [Barravecchio & Hajduk 2024; UNESCO, 2021]. If technology remains subordinate to the person while preserving privacy, freedom, moral judgment, and inner worth, then human dignity is not an obstacle to innovation but the very condition that makes innovation ethically human.

3.1 Autonomy and Agency

One of the major ethical questions posed by neurotechnologies regards whether they can preserve human autonomy when cognition becomes technologically mediated. Who thinks when human beings think with AI future AI-enabled BCIs such as implanted brain chips? Brain-computer interfaces already raise "questions about the degree of agency a BCI affords its user and the extent to which a BCI user ought to be accountable for actions undertaken via the device" [Davidoff 2020:9]. As future AI-enabled BCIs will be integrated into the human brain, it will be crucial to question the extent to which algorithms will shape preferences, choices, and beliefs at the level of thought and reasoning itself. In that sense, the boundary between assistance and influence becomes ethically decisive because human agency involves both the ability to act and the capacity to deliberate, choose, and endorse one's actions as one's own [Vlek et al. 2014; Burwell et al. 2017].

There is also a possibility of AI systems subtly steering cognition even before a decision is ever made. Catena [2026] argues that AI mediation can influence "autonomous deliberation, decision-making, and behaviour," while automation can alter "the conditions for autonomous choice and action." From the perspective of implanted BCIs, such influence may be even more severe since the technology may interact directly with neural processes, rather than merely suggesting options. In a context where one's memory recall, attention, or thought are increasingly filtered or mediated through AI, the question is whether it is the machine or the person who is actually making decisions. Although the person may still experience the decision as internal, its formation may already be partially externalised through the future GenAI-empowered implanted brain chip or another BCI technology. This challenges the traditional understanding of responsibility, which places the human person at the centre. If AI contributes, influences, or mediates a certain decision, who is morally responsible?

In the context of BCI ethics, responsibility is not a straightforward issue. Burwell et al. (2017) raise concerns about "moral and legal responsibility," including whether users have less control over thoughts than over actions and whether they are responsible for "all of the device's output." Similarly, Sun and Ye (2023) argue that "autonomy and agency are vital for individuals' ability to control their daily activities spontaneously," but that write-in BCIs may "alter users' agency and autonomy" and can even erode them if users receive signals they cannot control. Thus, if AI-generated suggestions become too authoritative in one's mind, then the user may no longer be the primary source of practical reasoning but a dependent recipient in a machine-assisted decision chain. It is crucial to ensure that such systems neither replace nor weaken the ability of human beings to make ethical and rational decisions or judgments nor hinder them from acting freely and being responsible for their own actions [Zeng et al., 2021]. The Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (2020) emphasised that:

> *This technology should not be used against a subject's will or in a way that prevents the subject from freely taking further decisions about their continued use. Special care will be needed where such technology is used to treat chronic pain, drug dependency or other conditions where interruption of treatment could lead to discomfort or distress… This technology should not prevent an individual from acting freely and being responsible for their actions. Human beings, acting freely according to their natural (as opposed to enhanced or symbiotic) consciousness, must remain the only decision-makers and the primary actors in society, especially in matters that may impact human rights and democratic processes.*

The formulation is important because it outlines the goal not as maximal machine contribution, but as preserved human agency, capacity, and responsibility. While a technology that helps human beings to think better is beneficial, one that gradually transfers or replaces cognitive authority from humans to machines through brain chips is unethical [Zeng et al., 2021]. Can human beings remain autonomous and responsible for their decisions when their thinking is technologically mediated through future BCIs such as implanted brain chips? The response depends on the extent to which AI integration strengthens or weakens cognitive freedom. Is the user still able to critically assess AI inputs, reject them, revise them and own the final judgment? If the answer is yes, then AI mediation may remain compatible with autonomy.

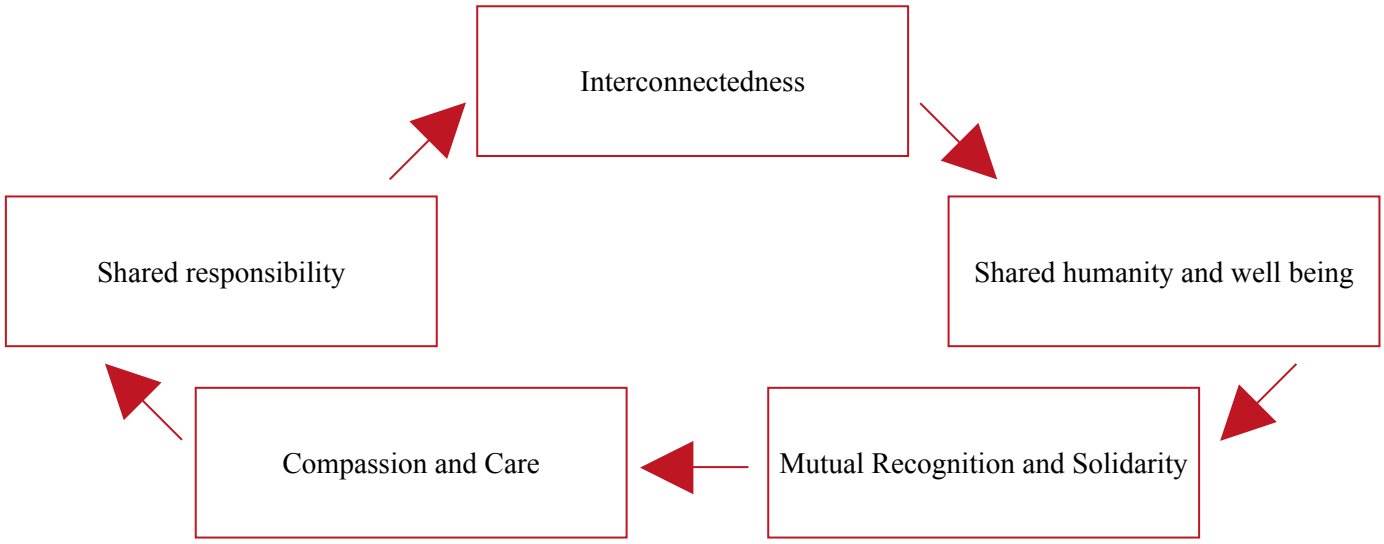
However, if the neurotechnology becomes so deeply embedded that it shapes human perception, desire, thought or belief before reflective endorsement is possible, then agency has been reconfigured [Yuste et al. 2017; Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly 2020]. With the development of BCIs and neurotechnology in general, it is apparent that the future of human personhood depends on whether AI integration enables people to do more while remaining authors of their own lives. Once the question moves from restoration to enhancement, the challenge is not simply to regain agency, but to ensure that the enhanced mind still has agency at all. In other words, if AI integration aims at strengthening human agency, then it may enrich personhood [Gruica 2025]. However, if it slowly replaces human cognitive authority, then the very definition of human agency and autonomy can be dissolved from within. The ethical future of neurotechnology depends upon ensuring that humans remain the primary decision-makers, even when they think with machines.

4. Towards an Ethical Future of Human-AI Integration

The future of brain-computer interfaces and other implantable neural interfaces such as AI-integrated brain enhancement should not be built on either uncritical acceptance or absolute rejection. While embracing cognitive enhancement might be beneficial, the extent to which such enhancement can be governed so that it remains faithful to human dignity, autonomy, transparency, and human control remains problematic. UNESCO [2025] notes that "throughout the whole lifecycle of neurotechnology, the protection and promotion of the rights of autonomy and freedom of thought must be secured," and that neurotechnology "should never be used to exert undue influence or manipulation." Principles such as autonomy and thought are critical because they ensure that technological innovation remains answerable to the moral reality of the person.

Moreover, ethical governance must ensure that BCIs are designed and deployed in ways that preserve meaningful human oversight, informed consent, and accountability, rather than simply being a checklist of safety measures. Zeng et al. [2021:210] hold that "the autonomy of human decision making and judgment should be respected and maintained," and that such devices "should not be used to replace and weaken human decision-making ability." Through openness and transparency, tech companies such as Neuralink should ensure that risks are mitigated throughout the design, development and deployment stages [Zeng et al. 2021]. Such a process creates a conducive ethical vision for any future in which implanted brain chips remain tools for human good rather than instruments of cognitive control or manipulation.

An African philosophical perspective centred on the principle of *Ubuntu* deepens this framework in critical ways. In African thought, personhood is often understood relationally rather than as isolated self-sufficiency [Mutelo et al. 2026; Gwara & Mutelo 2025]. According to Mangena (2020), "the term *Ubuntu* emphasises the importance of a group or community, and it finds its clear expression in the Nguni/Ndebele phrase: *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu,* which when translated to Shona means *munhu munhu muvanhu* (a person is a person through other persons)." The notion of *Ubuntu* thus emphasises the importance of shared humanity or well-being, interconnectedness, and the common good. In that sense, AI-integrated cognition enhancement should lead to human flourishing rather than being regarded as solely individual or computational. This is because the person is constituted in community, responsibility, and shared life. The diagram below shows the interconnectedness.



Ubuntu also challenges the understanding that enhancement is primarily an individual achievement. From the perspective of *Ubuntu*, the value of a person cannot be reduced to superior intelligence, enhanced memory, or increased computational efficiency. This is because personhood is fundamentally realised through relationships characterised by mutual recognition, solidarity, compassion, and shared responsibility [Mangena 2020; Gwara & Mutelo 2025]. Thus, AI-integrated cognition should be evaluated not only according to what enhanced individuals become capable of doing but also according to the extent to which such enhancement strengthens or weakens communal flourishing. For instance, neurotechnologies that isolate persons within technologically optimised individualism would stand in tension with *Ubuntu's* relational conception of humanity. *Ubuntu* therefore complements rather than replaces universal human rights by grounding dignity in relationships of mutual recognition and communal responsibility.

As tech companies such as Neuralink Corporation continue to make significant advancements, it is crucial to shift the question from what an enhanced individual can do to how enhancements are likely to affect relationships, shared purpose, solidarity, care, and the common good [Mouazen & El Bouyed 2025; Zeng et al. 2021; Mutelo 2025]. The narrow technological imagination that treats the human being as a configurable cognitive system can be challenged by such a holistic notion of personhood. The perspective shifts emphasis from reductionist perspectives that focus on speed, output, or information processing when valuing persons. The ethical legitimacy of AI-integrated cognition should be justified based on whether it leads to human flourishing communally and humanely or merely focuses on efficiency. Rather than diminishing the traditional understanding of personhood, it must strengthen the capacities by which persons relate, deliberate, and act responsibly in relation to themselves and others.

Given that cognitive enhancement may soon be widespread, the challenge lies in how human beings can embrace it without losing the qualities that make humans persons. The ethical acceptance of cognitive enhancement should depend on whether it remains subordinated to human dignity and relational flourishing [UNESCO 2025; Yuste et al. 2017]. Technologically augmenting brains does not necessarily mean that persons must be treated as isolated optimisation projects and their freedom, thought, and agency ought to be exercised based on moral relation. This requires a high level of transparency on the part of tech companies because without openness about how neural systems work, it can be challenging for users to freely consent, communities to fully trust, and to prevent moral responsibility from being blurred. As Mouazen and El Bouyed (2025) put it, "technical transparency and ethical integration are the essential conditions for responsible BCI development."

Therefore, we argue that the future of AI-integrated cognition enhancement should be guided by an understanding of humans as relational, moral, and dignified beings rather than merely enhanced cognitive systems. This calls for the need to resist any move to define human worth in terms of computational performance or efficiency alone. From that perspective, BCIs do not force individuals to choose between human dignity and embracing technological progress. The foregoing discussion suggests that future ethical governance should avoid both uncritical technological enthusiasm and reactionary resistance to innovation. Instead, responsible AI-integrated neurotechnology requires a balanced framework capable of distinguishing ethically legitimate enhancement from enhancement that compromises human dignity. Such a framework recognises that technological innovation is not ethically valuable merely because it expands human capability. Rather, its legitimacy depends upon whether it preserves authentic agency, relational responsibility, and the intrinsic worth of every person.

Conclusion

The promises of brain-computer interface technologies create an exciting but ethically demanding future. Although they have the potential to extend human capacities beyond imagination, several crucial questions about personhood, identity, autonomy, and dignity can be raised. It is beneficial that these technologies improve memory, reasoning, or creativity. However, it is questionable if they can do so without diminishing the very definition of being human. This paper has argued that AI-integrated cognition through BCIs should be judged by both technological sophistication and its capacity to serve human flourishing. Neurotechnology must aim to strengthen human freedom, responsibility, and meaningful agency, rather than replace or diminish them. However, if it diminishes or replaces human judgment, blurs moral responsibility, or reduces persons to optimised cognitive systems, then the very dignity they claim to improve is undermined. The emphasis should therefore be on ethical reflection, considerate governance, and a profound commitment to safeguarding human dignity and autonomy. Neurotechnologies should remain instruments in the service of humanity, rather than redefining or reconfiguring persons, thereby reducing them to machines. With the ongoing advancements in BCIs, the challenge is to ensure that cognitive enhancement remains humanly meaningful, morally accountable, and socially life-giving. Therefore, the ethical future of brain-computer interfaces will not be determined by the sophistication of artificial intelligence but by the moral vision that guides its development. In the face of AI-integrated cognitive enhancement, human dignity, meaningful autonomy, and relational personhood must function as the normative boundaries within which future neurotechnologies

evolve. From this perspective, the most important question is not whether humans can smoothly and safely merge or integrate with intelligent machines, but whether such integration enables persons to flourish while remaining free, morally responsible, and genuinely human.

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A Critique of the Notion of Patriarchy in Feminism Using Metz's Relational Ethics.

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Abstract

Within the intellectual ambience of feminism is the notion that the human world is patriarchal. Hence, feminism is a movement aimed at dethroning patriarchy, which seems to favour men over women. This entails that for feminists, the world is lopsided. Therefore, there is a need to reorder the system for women to be fully integrated into society and share equal privileges and rights as men. We disagree that this feminist patriarchal view of the world is correct. Thus, in this paper, we argue that Metz's conception of harmony can assist us in understanding that the argument by the feminists that there is a conflict between genders is not real but imagined. Metz's relational ethics, which is built on the sub-Saharan African notion of 'relationship', asserts that humans [irrespective of their gender] can affirm their identity and live in solidarity if and only if they operate with the principle of communion. This ethical theory upsets the feminist's thought that the world is patriarchal. Instead, it shows that identity distinction between the male and female genders leads to solidarity in human society.

Keywords: Feminism, Gender Roles, Harmonious Relations, Patriarchy

Introduction

Feminist theory has for a long time presented gender relations as in conflict. As a conflict theory, feminism assumes that a society consists of opposed fractions [sexes] whose relations are based on the domination of men over women. The theory believes that the root cause of women's oppression is a patriarchal understanding of gender relations. Thus, the major aim of feminism is to eliminate male privilege and sex distinctions such that genital distinction between human beings should not matter culturally and politically. Also, feminists champion the need for society to recognise the social role that women play in reproduction, and this should be accommodated in the workplace. They sometimes push further the argument to suggest the need for compensation for this socially essential service. At its height, feminism argues for the reordering of society along a matriarchal basis by opposing patriarchal oppression. With this understanding, we then present what we believe should be the proper understanding of gender relations in African societies, drawing from Thaddeus Metz's understanding of conceptions of harmonious relations in African societies.

Contrary to the understanding of gender as in conflict, we invoke Metz's argument of harmonious relations in African ethics to address the notion of patriarchy in feminism. Metz's ethics is known as African relational ethics [Metz 2012; 2013; 2014; 2017a; 2017b; 2018; Metz and Gaie 2010; Metz and Miller 2016, etc]. This ethics is built on and prizes the sub-Saharan African notion of relationship as an ethical ideal. It holds that humans must be relational to be ethical or moral. It advocates harmonious coexistence and communitarian relations within human society. In such a society, it becomes difficult to segregate and oppress anyone since all commune harmoniously.

Following the above argument, we contend that gender relations should be understood as males and females communing with each other or participating in harmonious relations as exhibited in African virtues. As we advance our argument, we will discuss diverse feminist thinking demonstrating how they portray patriarchy, hence befitting the description of feminism as a conflict theory.

1. The Question of Patriarchy in Feminism

Feminism as a discourse is not monolithic; it has many variations and movements since its inception. Thus, it becomes clear that there are ideological differences between the various feminist groups. However, they unite when it comes to their views against hierarchical relationships between men and women, which they believe is not a biological destiny. For purposes of this paper, we are more concerned with radical feminism, which argues that patriarchy is a foundational system of male dominance embedded in social and sexual relations. Radical feminists believe that patriarchy is responsible for women's oppression. The word patriarchy derives from the Greek words —*pater* [father] and *arche* [rule] [William 1994:209], and literally means the rule of the father in a male-dominated family. Thus, originally patriarchy is understood to mean a father who rules over a family [Peirik 2018:8]. However, with the coming of feminism, the definition of patriarchy became broader. Ray defines patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women [2011:1]. In Daly's words, patriarchy is:

> *1: society manufactured and controlled by males: FATHERLAND; society in which every legitimated institution is entirely in the hands of males and a few selected henchwomen; society characterized by oppression, repression, depression, narcissism, cruelty, racism, classism, ageism, [speciesism,] objectification, sadomasochism, necrophilia; joyless society, ruled by Godfather, Son, and Company; society fixated on proliferation, propagation, procreation, and bent on the destruction of all Life 2: the prevailing religion of the entire planet, whose essential message is necrophilia [2006:53].*

Bhasin notes that patriarchy is now used to refer to "male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women and to characterise a system whereby women are kept subordinate in several ways" [2006:3]. This domination of women by men is understood to take place in both private and public spheres. The private sphere is the family and the public sphere is society. As Laurien puts it:

> *Patriarchy is a social system controlled by men and as an inheritance which is passed on from father to son. Family members are dependent on, and submissive to, the male head of the household. In its broader sense, patriarchy is a system in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women and which extends beyond the household to society in general [2004:1]'*

Thus, for most feminists, the term patriarchy designates the power relationship between men and women. Understood this way, patriarchy is viewed not just as a term but a concept that helps understand women's realities. Wamue-Ngare and Njoroge [2011:14] further explain that patriarchal culture is institutionalised through a rigorous socialisation process in which every community member is aware of what duties, responsibilities and roles are expected from them, which is perceived as the correct order crucial for family and communal harmony. Through institutions such as the academy, the church, and the family, it justifies and reinforces women's subordination to men. For feminists, patriarchal relations are not inevitable but are constructed relations that can be changed. They believe that patriarchal ideology exaggerates biological differences between men and women, making certain that men always have the dominant, or masculine roles

and women always have the subordinate or feminine ones [Sultana 2010: 3]. In support of this view, Walby [1990:20] sees patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women. This understanding of the concept helps feminists explain the notion of biological determinism – the view that men and women are naturally different because of their biology or anatomy and, therefore, assigned different roles. Thus, feminists believe that patriarchy is artificial and that historical processes are responsible for its creation.

Furthermore, Engels [1940] gives an important explanation of the origins of patriarchy. For him, the world-historical defeat of the female, which involves the development of private property, gave birth to women's subordination. He believes that both the division of classes and the subordination of women developed historically. With the advent of private property, men wanted to retain power and property to pass it on to their children [Engels 1940]. Hence, to establish the father's right, women had to be domesticated and confined and their sexuality regulated and controlled. With the emergence of private property, women's housework sank into insignificance compared to men's productive labour. "The world historical defeat of the female sex with the establishment of capitalism based on private property ownership by men did away with inheritance of property and social position through female line" [Bhasin 1993:24-25]. The bourgeois families who owned private property emerged as patriarchal families where women were subjugated [Suranjita 2008:7]. Such patriarchal families became oppressive as men ensured that their property was passed on only to their sons. Therefore, bourgeois families and private property as a by-product of capitalism subordinated and oppressed women. Marxist feminists and socialist feminists believe that it is not women's biology alone but private property and monogamous marriage, economic and political dominance by men, and their control over female sexuality which led to patriarchy [Suranjita 2008:8].

Contrary to Engels' views, radical feminists such as Brownmiller [1976] and Firestone [1974] believe that patriarchy precedes private property. They challenge the notion of femininity and masculinity as mutually exclusive and biologically determined categories. The ideology of motherhood subjugates women and perpetuates patriarchy, which forces women to be mothers and determines the conditions of their motherhood [Suranjita 2008:12]. However, Walby [1990:4] notes that there are differences between radical feminists over the basis of male supremacy. Still, often this is considered to involve the appropriation of women's sexuality and bodies, while in some accounts male violence is seen as the root cause. Sexual practice is seen to be socially constructed around male notions of desire, not women's.

Further, sexuality is seen as a significant site of male domination over women, through which men impose their notion of femininity on women [1990:4]. For radical feminists then, heterosexuality is socially institutionalised in contemporary society and organises many aspects of gender relations. They uphold the view that the original and basic contradiction is between sexes and not between economic classes.

Generally, the feminists' view of the oppression of women seems to come from patriarchy [in private spheres] and extends to capitalism [in the public spheres]. Hence, this outline of the feminists' views on women's oppression brings about the sexes in conflict. To this effect, socialist feminists call for a transformation of society to eliminate the categories of race, class, gender and sexuality. In contrast, radical feminists call for a complete revolution of society to alter the patriarchal system. We, however, argue against the feminists' patriarchal view of the world as a correct depiction of gender relations in African societies. We believe that Metz's relational ethics can assist us in demonstrating that the conflict between genders explicated by feminists was an imagined one.

2. Metz's Relational Ethics

Thaddeus Metz articulates an African theory of morality known as relational ethics. This ethics is African because it is African culture-inspired. The sub-Saharan notion of relationship inspires it. He notes that this idea of relationship is also found in non-African cultures but is a dominant idea across sub-Saharan Africa. This idea of relationship is apparent in two famous African aphorisms. These include: 'A person is a person throu-

gh other persons' and 'I am because we are' [Mbiti 1990: 106; Mandela 2013: 22; Metz and Gaie 2010: 274; Metz 2017b: 444; 2018: 38]. The point is that a person must be in a relationship with other persons and live in the 'we consciousness' to be a person. In this context, the person must be humane and develop and exhibit humanness [Metz and Gaie 2010: 275; 2017b: 444]. Metz posits that the South African concept of *Ubuntu* encapsulates this human excellence in indigenous Africa as seen in the sub-Saharan idea of relationship [Metz 2010; 2017a; 2017b; 2018; Gwara & Mutelo 2025; Igbalumun & Mutelo 2025].

Furthermore, this idea of relationship promotes "living communally with others" [Metz and Miller 2016: 4]. In this communal living, humans see the other as an integral part of the self. Hence, no one sees the other as an outsider. On the contrary, all are part of the whole – the community.

Before Metz, some African scholars have discussed this idea of relationality in their writings. These include Segun Gbadegesin [1991], Gessler Nkondo [2007], and Dismas Masolo [2010]. For Gbadegesin, "Every member is expected to consider him/herself an integral part of the whole and to play an appropriate role towards achieving the good of all" [1991: 65]. Nkondo notes that for *Ubuntu* advocates and philosophers, the principle that informs and shapes their life is "commitment to the good of the community in which their identities were formed, and a need to experience their lives as bound up in that of their community" [2007: 91]. According to Dismas Masolo, what defines their being is the communitarian values of "living a life of mutual concern for the welfare of others, such as in a cooperative creation and distribution of wealth … Feeling integrated with as well as willing to integrate others into a web of relations free of friction and conflict" [2010: 240]. From these thoughts, Metz systematically argues that sub-Saharan African ethics [morality] is essentially relational because it has to do with relationships.

For Metz, a relationship is ideal in most African societies south of the Sahara. So, relationality defines the lifeworld of Africans within this region. This idea of relationality is found in and reflects concepts such as communion, life [vitality], and the common good. These concepts are fundamental and foundational to Metz's ethical theory. They are the concepts Metz employs to articulate the principles that undergird his ethics. These are the principles of communion, vitality, and the common good.

Principle of Communion: The principle of communion is concerned with harmony in society. It asserts that harmony must be the ideal of the rightness of an action. According to Metz, "actions are right insofar as they promote [or prize] communion or harmony" [2017a: 67]. The converse of this is morally wrong or immoral. Communion or harmony is what makes an action moral. Thus, we see why Desmond Tutu contends that "social harmony is for us the *summum bonum* – the greatest good. Anything that subverts or undermines this sought-after good is to be avoided like the plague" [1999: 35]. According to this principle, discord and disharmony must be avoided because they are evil and antithetical to social well-being.

Principle of Vitality: This principle of vitality emphasises the sanctity of life. Morality is defined by the fact that an action enhances life. Hence, Metz states: "actions are right insofar as they promote vitality" [2017a: 67]. Vitality has to do with life. If community or harmony is feasible, then life ought to be promoted in such a society. Life is the highest value that must be placed or prized above everything else. Several African scholars have explained this principle in different but related manners. These include Kasenene, Pantaleon Iroegbu, etc. In Kasenene's words, "any action which increases life or vital force is right, and whatever decreases it is wrong" [1994: 140]. For Iroegbu, "all people and activities that diminish life are in all cultures considered evil, while those that promote it are regarded as good" [2005: 447]. This principle states that life is supreme and definitive of the morality of an action.

Principle of Common Good: If there is communion and life, it is necessary to promote the common good in society – that is, the life and well-being of all. This idea of common good is the focus of this principle. Although this principle is well articulated by Metz, one can see similar thought in Kwame Gyekye's words, which read: "actions that promote human welfare or interest are good, while those that detract from human welfare are bad" [2010: 109]. Collective human welfare is what is emphasised here. Individual interest is subsumed under this collective welfare. This collective welfare is what Metz refers to as the common good. Hence, Metz states this principle thus: "actions are right insofar as they promote the common good without

treating people's dignity disrespectfully in the process" [2017a: 68].

These three principles point to the fact that relationship is pivotal to morality. There is morality where there is harmonious coexistence, promotion of common or collective human life, and well-being. However, Metz favours the principle of communion/harmony above the principles of vitality and common good. Metz substantiates his preference for the principle of communion/harmony because it grounds the idea of human dignity and rights as exemplified in freedom of movement, political participation, informed consent, and justice, amongst others, as flowing from the capacity to communally relate [Metz 2012]. Also, the principle of communion/harmony more forcefully promotes the idea of harmonious coexistence than the principles of vitality and common good. Therefore, if an action leads to a harmonious relationship, then it is moral. In such a society, people live peacefully with others. If this is the case, then there is identity and solidarity within such a society. The point is that African relational ethics is at the root of and promotes social identity and solidarity [Metz and Gaie 2010: 276; Metz 2013: 81; 88; 2017b: 445; 2018: 40]. These are the two ethical ideals [identity and solidarity] inherent in a communal/harmonious relationship [Metz 2012: 1; 2013: 81; 2017b: 446; 2018: 40].

Metz argues that individuals within a harmonious community possess identity. He sees identity as what humans realise when they belong to a community or group. An individual shares the community's collective identity and realises their individuality [personal identity] within this community. Writing on collective identity, Metz quips that it is "a matter of considering oneself as part of the group, experiencing life as bound with others, being close and feeling integrated" [2014: 149]. The individual is assimilated into the group, and the group's identity becomes his/her identity. Hence, to belong is to have an identity – a collective identity. Here, the individual is seen as a 'we' – the community or group they belong to. What this entails is that it is within the community or group that the individual achieves personal identity. In this context, the individual in the group realises their individuality/particularity that makes them stand out in the group. They might not realise this identity if they stand outside the community. Thus, on the one hand, Metz's African relational ethics affirms identity.

On the other hand, Metz's African relational ethics enhances and promotes solidarity. In a harmonious community, there is also solidarity. Solidarity is concerned with care for others. According to Metz,

> *[t]o exhibit solidarity with one another is for people to care about each other's quality of life, in two senses. First, it means that they engage in natural aid, acting in ways that are expected to benefit each other [ideally, especially over time]. Second, caring is a matter of people's attitudes, such as emotions and motives being positively oriented towards others, say, by sympathising with them and helping them for their sake. For people to fail to exhibit solidarity could be for them to be indifferent to each other's flourishing or to exhibit ill will in the form of hostility and cruelty [2012: 26].*

Metz holds that identity and solidarity are Siamese twins. One does not exist without the other. These two concepts lead to and are manifestations of a harmonious community. According to Metz,

> *[o]ne could identify with others, but not exhibit solidarity with them – probably workers in relation to management in a capitalist firm. One could also exhibit solidarity with others, but not identify with them, e.g. by making anonymous donations to a charity. My proposal, following the limitations of several African thinkers, is that a promising conception of community includes both kinds of relationship [2012: 26].*

African relational ethics advocates a relationship of inseparable identity [identity with each other and taking one's distinctness from the group] and solidarity [caring, cooperating, and complementing one another]. Thaddeus Metz and Sarah Miller explain this communal dimension to African relational ethics from two fronts:

> *On the one hand, there is a relationship of sharing a way of life, considering oneself a part of the whole, experiencing life as bound up with others, and feeling integrated. On the other hand, there is reference to a relationship of caring for one another's quality of life that is, achieving the good of all, being committed to the good of others, and being concerned for others' welfare [2016: 5].*

Hence, African relational ethics is an ethics of 'friendship' and 'love' rooted in the relationship that leads to communal living. Metz and Miller referred to this relationship as "friendly – relationship" or "familial relationship" [Metz and Gaie 2010: 276; Metz 2012: 394; 2017: 445; Metz and Miller 2016: 5]. In this moral theory, there is sharing of life and care for each other such that everyone's dignity is promoted.

The bottom line of Metz's African relational ethics is that individuals need to cherish the relationship and maintain a harmonious communion with one another in the community in which they exist. If this is the case, then this relational ethics is communitarian and egalitarian. Therefore, it is an ethical system that enhances communal coexistence, equality, equity, and justice. On this premise, Metz's African relational ethics can function as an option for articulating a feminist theory that is not lopsided but addresses the challenge of patriarchy.

3. The Implication of Metz's Relational Ethics for the Notion of Patriarchy in Feminism

Gender classification has always been there in human societies since time immemorial. However, our contestation is with the feminists' understanding and characterisation of the notion of patriarchy. As indicated earlier, understood from its etymological definition, patriarchy means rule by the father. However, it is the feminists who later defined it in different ways to suit their purposes and pit males and females against each other. To demonstrate that the feminist understanding of patriarchy is faulty, we invoke Metz's thought of human relations in African societies. This is encapsulated in Metz's African relational ethics, emphasising the harmonious communal coexistence of humans. Thus, gender relations ought to be understood as harmonious communion of sexes as opposed to the feminists' understanding of genders in conflict.

As discussed by feminists, the notion of patriarchy negates Metz's relational ethics and its underlying principle of communion [Metz 2017a]. This is because patriarchy elevates males above females and gives the males privileges that the females are denied. An argument like this demonstrates that females cannot contribute effectively towards society such that their complementary roles are not recognised. Here, their solidarity relationship is relegated to the background while that of the male is given prominence. In this case, the female identity is not fully realised because they are only meant to be seen and not to be heard or given recognition like their male counterparts. Thus, the male identity and contribution are overemphasised to the detriment of the female identity and contribution. Although males and females coexist in human society, they are not given the same social recognition and roles.

Given the above scenario, males and their social roles are placed above females and their social roles. This is because the relationship between males and females is lopsided, as males are above females in all respects. The fact is that the principle of communion [Metz 2017a] is not applied accordingly in such a society. Hence, the goal of harmonious communal coexistence is defeated with the practice of patriarchy. However, Metz's relational ethics and its underlying principle of communion help us reconceptualise patriarchy such that males and females not only coexist but also realise their identities and contribute in solidarity to the common good.

In societies, certain things are expected from males and females. These, however, need not be understood as implying oppression or the domination of women by men as witnessed in feminism. Speaking of the Yoruba people, Oyewumi claims that body type was not the basis of social hierarchy, and neither was biology the foundation of social ranking [1997: xii]. For Metz, a general understanding of gender relations is imbued in the African understanding of harmonious relations. It is based on the view that males and females complement each other. In such societies, individuals are grouped based on their societal roles, and these have nothing to do with one's biological makeup. Such societies are not characterised by oppression, repression, cruelty, or a joyless society that is bent on the destruction of life, as is the case with feminists' patriarchal societies [Daly, 2006:53].

Metz's principle of communion gives the impression that males and females have to coexist and live in harmony. This is because harmony is a fundamental moral value that humans need to pursue given that both the

male and female genders can communally relate [Metz 2012]. If both males and females communally relate such that there is harmony in the community, then they are termed good. In such a society, there is mutual respect among the male and female genders. This harmonious relationship naturally leads to the practice of the principle of vitality. With the principle of vitality, males and females see their respective life as supreme. Thus, both males and females seek to protect life regardless of the possessors. This has a direct link to the principle of the common good.

Through Metz's principle of the common good, it is difficult to envision the conflict between males and females in African societies. What is of paramount importance is that this principle emphasises actions that promote society's welfare and the common good. By common good, we understand Metz to mean the welfare of each individual belonging to the group regardless of sex. Hence, cruelty, oppression, and repression disrespect people's dignity, and the principle of the common good does not approve of this. Furthermore, Metz's relational ethics better describes the relationship between the sexes in most societies. The idea is not to fight for equality between men and women; instead, these two sexes maintain harmonious relations based on complementarity. In line with this, Olajubu [2004: 44] notes that the Yoruba hold that the question to ask about the state of the sexes is not which sex is dominant but, rather, over which areas each sex enjoys prominence. Further, the prominence that one sex enjoys in a particular human activity does not make the people in that sexual category independent of others.

From Metz's characterisation of human relations, men and women are understood as socialising with each other and the environment. Thus, the individual thrives on entering into concrete relations with others. That is why existence is thought with and through material otherness rather than against or beyond it. In support of Metz, Eze, a Nigerian anthropologist, argues that the defining characteristic of personhood is to be in a dialogical relationship with others within a community [Eze 2009:387]. Thus, for Metz, the human person is a communal being whose existence embodies interaction with other subjects. This gives rise to the notion of African communalism.

In African communalism, the human is understood as socially dependent and continuously participates in mutual relations with others. Therefore, women are not complete without their male counterparts, and neither are men complete without their female counterparts. Their existence is determined through a continuous, interdependent, harmonious engagement with each other. The subject is therefore never complete or final. It is determined through ongoing mutual engagement with others. In other words, a closer examination of human relations in Metz's ethics is incompatible with the gender binaries of feminism that elevate one gender above the other. In Metz's relational ethics, patriarchy ought to be understood from a radically different perspective from that subscribed to by feminists. It has to do with males leading without oppressing females. This is because the gender binaries entail both male and female genders communing together. Thus, the male and female genders realise their identity in this gender relationship.

Metz speaks of identity [Metz 2013; 2017a; 2018]. Linking his ideas to the notion of patriarchy, we argue that men or women consider themselves as part of the human group sharing in the fate of others, being close, belonging, and participating. In such societies, it is difficult, if not impossible, to find traits of the feminists' patriarchy, such as oppression and cruelty. For it is of utmost importance for one to belong to the group; they should be able to uphold and prize the good of others and be sensitive to others' interests. Since oppression is understood to mean exercising authority or power in a burdensome, cruel, and unjust manner, this does not resonate well with relational ethics that emphasises friendliness, sensitivity to the interests of others, and love. However, it leads to solidarity between men and women. Hence, the manifestation of values such as caring, compassion, friendliness, generosity amid humility and peaceful coexistence [Metz 2017a].

The question that comes to mind is whether Metz's relational ethics leads to the view that patriarchy is absent in human society? No! This relational ethics entails that there could be patriarchy in the sense of males leading in love and allowing women complete privileges and rights like their male counterparts. This idea of patriarchy is not oppressive. Neither does it subjugate the female gender. Instead, it gives females a place among males in society. Thus, males and females are relational beings who realise their identities in this relationship and exhibit solidarity.

Conclusion

So far, we argued that the notion of patriarchy exists but not in its feminists' oppressive sense. We have pursued this thesis using Metz's relational ethics, which holds that humans harmoniously coexist. They realise their identity and live in solidarity for the common good and enhance human life. In this scenario, gender oppression is a mirage, but gender complementarity is feasible. It becomes imperative for humans, irrespective of their gender, to imbibe and exhibit the principle of communion enshrined in Metz's relational ethics. This is because relational ethics and its undergirding principle of communion inculcate the spirit of togetherness and abhor divisiveness that the feminists see in patriarchy. Thus, with this ethics and its principle of communion, males and females realise their identity and exhibit solidarity, which drives every thriving society.

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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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Indigenous-Led Forest and Land Conservation in Response to Climate Change Using AI Models.

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Abstract

The accelerated impacts of climate change have significantly worsened forest degradation and land mismanagement. This study aimed to explore how AI could be integrated with IKS to promote climate-resilient land and forest management. A mixed-methods approach was employed. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, while secondary data were obtained from relevant literature. The population sampling technique used was purposive, and the sample size was 30. The selected participants were 12 Indigenous elders, 10 traditional leaders, and 8 environmental officers. Data were gathered through 15 semi-structured interviews, 3 focus group discussions, and a review of relevant secondary sources. Indigenous indicators, such as phenological patterns and sacred groves, were carefully documented. Findings showed that 85% of environment officers and traditional elders believed that traditional ecological markers could complement AI algorithms. The primary data confirmed the continued effectiveness of Indigenous monitoring methods, while secondary sources supported AI's potential in recognising patterns. However, 70% expressed concerns over data ownership, cultural sensitivity, and the relevance of AI applications. The study recommended the integration of IKS and AI for climate resilience through Forest and Land Conservation.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), Artificial Intelligence (AI), Forest Conservation, Climate-Resilient Land Management, Environmental Monitoring.

Introduction

Climate change has intensified environmental stresses globally, with profound impacts on forest ecosystems and land management, particularly in vulnerable regions such as Zimbabwe's Chivi District. The degradation of forests and mismanagement of land resources pose significant threats to ecological sustainability and community livelihoods [Chibememe et al., 2014; Mutelo 2023]. Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) have historically played a critical role in maintaining resilient ecosystems through deeply rooted cultural practices and environmental stewardship. These systems offer valuable insights into local ecological patterns and sustainable resource management, having evolved over centuries of intimate interaction between communities and their environment [Chingombe et al., 2021].

Concurrently, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a powerful tool for environmental monitoring, prediction, and management. AI techniques such as Random Forest classifiers, Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), and Support Vector Machines (SVMs) have been successfully applied in developed countries to address challenges such as deforestation detection, wildfire prediction, and land degradation assessment using large-scale data sources such as satellite imagery and remote sensing [Mugabe et al. 2012]. Despite these advances, AI applications often lack local contextualization and do not incorporate the rich ecological knowledge embedded in Indigenous practices [Marumure and Makuvara 2022].

Although the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) presents significant opportunities for climate-resilient conservation, its implementation remains constrained. This due to epistemological differences, concerns over Indigenous data sovereignty, and limited technological infrastructure in many rural African settings [Mugambiwa 2018].

This study explored the potential of harmonising AI with Indigenous ecological knowledge to foster climate-resilient forest and land conservation in Chivi District. It focused on documenting Indigenous conservation practices, identifying suitable AI applications, and designing a conceptual framework that respects Indigenous worldviews and promotes ecological justice. Through a mixed-methods approach involving Indigenous elders, traditional leaders, and environmental officers, this research aims to bridge the gap between modern technology and traditional knowledge, ultimately contributing to sustainable environmental management and community empowerment in climate-vulnerable regions.

1. Background of the Study

Climate change-induced environmental stress has become a global challenge, triggering diverse responses in forest and land management worldwide [Mtupile and Liwenga 2017]. Developed countries experiencing climate stress, such as the United States, Australia, and parts of Europe, have increasingly adopted Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies. AI applications have been applied for forest monitoring, deforestation detection, wildfire prediction, and land use classification [Nyahunda and Tirivangasi 2019]. These AI applications mainly rely on large-scale satellite imagery and remote sensing to track vegetation health, soil moisture, and other critical environmental variables. An example of an AI application is the AI-enabled wildfire early-warning systems in the United States of America and Australia, which have improved disaster response times and reduced wildfire damage, demonstrating considerable effectiveness [Masunungure and Manyani 2020]. Precision forestry using AI-driven growth and yield applications has also improved timber production efficiency. However, these AI applications are mainly limited by data quality issues, model interpretability, and lack of local contextualization, thus reducing their applicability in certain regions.

In parallel to the advanced AI applications, many developed countries have recognised the value of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in environmental stewardship. IKS encompasses traditional ecological practices, cultural rituals, and land management methods that have evolved over centuries [Mutandwa et al. 2019]. In Australia, Indigenous fire management, which is known as *cultural burning*, has effectively reduced the severity and frequency of wildfires, improved biodiversity, and restored ecosystem health. Similarly, in Canada, Indigenous use of ecological indicators has guided sustainable harvesting and conservation with considerable success. Despite their effectiveness, these indigenous knowledge systems face challenges from modern land-use pressures, policy exclusion, and limited formal recognition [Nyahunda and Tirivangasi 2019]. Integrating IKS with AI tools is still in its early stages; despite its promise, this integration faces challenges from epistemological differences and data sovereignty concerns, which can undermine trust and participation. In developing countries, including those in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), AI adoption for environmental management is increasing but remains limited. South Africa and Botswana have implemented AI applications such as Random Forest and time series analyses to monitor land degradation and forecast agricultural [Jerikias et al. 2022]. These applications have improved early warning systems and resource allocation but often lack fine-scale, community-specific data. Explicit integration of IKS with AI tools is rare. Indigenous communities in these regions continue to employ ecological knowledge such as phenological observations, sacred groves, and soil indicators that have effectively sustained local ecosystems for generations. However, these practices are under threat from environmental degradation and socio-economic changes, and their exclusion from formal conservation strategies limits complete effectiveness.

Zimbabwe's marginalised semi-arid regions, such as Chivi District, are highly vulnerable to climate change impacts including drought and deforestation. Indigenous ecological knowledge in these areas, such as the use of sacred groves, seasonal indicators, and traditional soil conservation methods, has historically contributed to ecosystem resilience and sustainable land use [Mudombi and Nhamo 2014]. Specific IKS practices

for soil and forest management include *zai pits,* which are small planting basins that enhance water retention and soil fertility, contour ridges to reduce soil erosion, and the protection of indigenous tree species known for their deep roots and soil-binding properties. The use of natural mulches from leaf litter and crop residues has helped to maintain soil moisture and organic content.

The government of Zimbabwe, through the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Water and Rural Resettlement, has implemented several initiatives to combat land degradation and promote afforestation [Mavhura and Manyangadze 2021]. These include the Zimbabwe National Tree Planting Program, which fosters community participation in reforestation, and the Conservation Agriculture Program, aimed at improving soil fertility and reducing erosion. Traditional leaders continue to play a key role by encouraging local communities to uphold customary practices, enforce grazing controls, and protect culturally significant natural sites. These efforts have created a foundation for local engagement in land and forest stewardship, particularly in vulnerable, semi-arid regions [Shoko 2020].

Building on this foundation, several community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) initiatives have emerged. The Communal Areas Management Program for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) is one of the most prominent examples, enabling communities to manage wildlife and benefit economically from ecotourism and conservation [Mavhura and Manyangadze 2021]. The Zimbabwe Community Forest Association (ZCFA) supports participatory forest governance and woodland regeneration. In Chiredzi, the Chiredzi River Support Project (CRSP) promotes sustainable watershed management and agroecological practices. Similarly, the Mazvihwa Community Land Project integrates traditional ecological knowledge with grazing rotation and permaculture to restore degraded landscapes. These initiatives rely on continued community involvement and aim to link traditional knowledge with sustainable land use. However, they often face challenges such as limited funding, weak integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), and minimal use of modern monitoring technologies. Therefore, addressing these issues requires participatory, knowledge-driven approaches that bridge local traditions and advanced tools for adaptive environmental governance [Nhundu et al. 2021].

In order to strengthen conservation outcomes, there is a growing recognition of the need for collaborative frameworks that involve government agencies, traditional leaders, scientists, and communities. These partnerships promise to ensure that AI tools are adapted to local contexts and that Indigenous practices continue to inform sustainable land and forest management, especially in climate-vulnerable regions such as Chivi District. The advantages of integrating AI with IKS include improved environmental monitoring precision, development of culturally relevant conservation strategies, enhanced community engagement, and preservation of cultural heritage. However, limitations exist, such as infrastructural challenges, data ownership concerns, ethical issues, and potential misalignment between AI applications and Indigenous worldviews.

This study aimed to address these gaps by exploring how AI can be harmonised with Indigenous ecological knowledge to support climate-resilient land and forest management. It emphasised culturally sensitive, co-created frameworks that respect Indigenous epistemologies, promote ecological justice, and enhance sustainable environmental governance in vulnerable regions.

2. Problem Statement

Forest degradation and land mismanagement have become increasingly severe in Zimbabwe, particularly in rural areas such as Chivi District, due to the growing impacts of climate change. These environmental challenges are disrupting ecosystems, reducing agricultural productivity, and threatening the livelihoods of local communities. While Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) have historically supported the sustainable management of natural resources through practices such as sacred site protection, seasonal planting, and traditional weather forecasting, these practices are increasingly being overlooked in favour of externally introduced methods. At the same time, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a powerful tool for environmental monitoring and predictive modelling, but its implementation often lacks cultural relevance and community input, especially in African rural contexts.

There is currently a gap in the integration of IKS and AI for forest and land conservation in Zimbabwe. Most conservation and environmental monitoring strategies either rely heavily on modern technologies without local engagement or treat Indigenous knowledge as secondary, leading to poor adoption and limited impact. This lack of integration risks losing valuable Indigenous practices and fails to leverage AI's full potential in addressing climate-related challenges. Therefore, there is a critical need to develop a practical, culturally grounded framework that combines AI tools with Indigenous ecological knowledge to promote climate-resilient and community-led forest and land conservation in Chivi District. This study sought to address this gap by exploring how these two systems can work together effectively.

3. Conceptual Framework

This study's conceptual framework explores the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) to support climate-resilient forest and land conservation in Chivi District, Zimbabwe. Grounded in Social-Ecological Systems Theory, Knowledge Co-Production Theory, and Postcolonial Theory, the framework recognises Indigenous ecological knowledge such as phenological indicators, sacred groves, and customary land practices as vital to sustainable environmental management. These knowledge systems have long guided resource stewardship, and when strategically combined with AI technologies such as Random Forest classifiers, they can enhance the precision, contextual relevance, and scalability of conservation efforts.

The framework promotes a synergistic relationship where Indigenous knowledge informs and enriches AI applications, while AI enhances the analysis and monitoring of complex environmental dynamics. Emphasis is placed on community participation, ethical data use, and protection of cultural values and data sovereignty. Rather than replacing traditional practices, AI tools are positioned as complementary, offering decision support that respects local contexts. This integrated approach aims to foster an adaptive, inclusive, and culturally grounded model for forest and land conservation that is both scientifically robust and socially sustainable in the face of climate change.

4. Methodology

This study used a mixed-method approach to explore how Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be combined to support climate-resilient forest and land conservation in Chivi District, Zimbabwe. Primary and secondary data were collected to understand the practical relevance of Indigenous ecological knowledge and the technical capabilities of AI. A total of 30 participants were purposively selected based on their roles and knowledge in the local environment. There were 12 Indigenous elders, 10 traditional leaders, and 8 environmental officers. Data collection tools used were interview guides, focus group discussions (FGDs, audio recorders, and notebooks for recording ecological observations. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and field observations. Interviews of 15 in total were used to gather individual experiences and insights into traditional ecological markers. The variables focused on included sacred groves, seasonal animal behaviours, and rainfall prediction techniques. Three focus group discussions (FGDs) were allowed for collective reflection on the use and value of these traditional indicators. Field observations were conducted to physically document sacred sites, degraded areas, and local farming practices.

Furthermore, secondary data sources including environmental reports, policy documents, and academic literature were reviewed. These were used to understand the existing AI applications in environmental monitoring and land use management. These sources helped assess the potential role of AI tools in interpreting environmental variables such as vegetation cover, rainfall patterns, and land degradation. The data were analysed using both thematic analysis for qualitative inputs and descriptive statistics for quantitative feedback. Therefore, the conceptual framework was developed from the findings to illustrate how Indigenous

indicators could complement AI applications in monitoring environmental changes. Ethical considerations were addressed through informed consent, cultural sensitivity in knowledge sharing, and ensuring data ownership remained with the community. The combination of local insights and technical analysis aimed to create a realistic, community-grounded solution for forest and land conservation in Chivi District.

5. Findings and Discussions

This section presented the findings of the study in relation to the research questions and objectives. Data were collected from 30 purposively selected participants, comprising 12 Indigenous elders, 10 traditional leaders, and 8 environmental officers. The data were analysed using thematic analysis and descriptive statistical techniques. These findings were discussed in relation to the study's conceptual framework and relevant scholarly literature to provide context, interpret the results, and highlight their implications.

5.1 Demographic Profile of Participants

The study engaged 30 purposively selected participants comprising Indigenous elders (40%), traditional leaders (33.3%), and environmental officers (26.7%), whose age distribution further reflects a strong representation of knowledge holders aged 41 years and above (63.3%). This demographic composition aligned with the study's conceptual framework, which emphasised the co-production of knowledge by blending Indigenous epistemologies with scientific and technological approaches. Elders and traditional leaders served as custodians of oral ecological traditions, phenological indicators, and customary land stewardship practices. While environmental officers contributed technical expertise necessary for AI-driven conservation modelling. Therefore, by involving both cultural knowledge bearers and environmental professionals, the study established a foundation for integrated, climate-resilient conservation strategies. Table 1 below summarises the demographic characteristics of the population:

Table 1. Demographic distribution of study participants (n=30)

Demographic Variable	**Category**	**Number of Participants**	**Percentage (%)**
Age Group	30–40 years	6	20.0
	41–50 years	10	33.3
	51–60 years	9	30.0
	Above 60 years	5	16.7
Total		**30**	**100**
Profession/Role	Indigenous Elders	12	40.0
	Traditional Leaders	10	33.3
	Environmental Officers	8	26.7
Total		**30**	**100**

5.2 Indigenous Conservation Practices and Ecological Indicators

The study identified several critical Indigenous conservation practices and ecological indicators currently employed in Chivi District. Participants consistently emphasised the importance of sacred grove areas. These are preserved due to their spiritual significance and biodiversity richness, which serve as critical refuges for native flora and fauna. The phenological signs, including the flowering patterns of indigenous trees such as mupfura (*Sclerocarya birrea*), were widely used. These were used to predict climatic events such as rainfall and drought, thereby guiding agricultural and conservation decisions [Nhundu et al., 2021]. Furthermore, communal practices such as *Zunde Ramambo*, a traditional grain-sharing system, proved to play an essential role in ensuring food security during times of environmental stress. Other practices identified

included spirit mediums and rituals, which offer ancestral guidance for environmental stewardship, and taboo-based land-use restrictions. These were used to protect ecologically sensitive areas from overexploitation. The convergence of these practices reflects a deeply rooted Indigenous knowledge system that sustains local environmental management.

In parallel, participants expressed a cautiously optimistic view on the potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to complement rather than replace these Indigenous systems. AI applications were seen as valuable tools to enhance environmental monitoring and data analysis. Participants noted that these applications could detect illegal logging and environmental degradation within sacred groves more quickly and accurately than traditional monitoring methods. This capability enabled both community members and government authorities to respond promptly, facilitating timely interventions before extensive damage occurred [Chingombe et al., 2021]. Mudombi and Nhamo [2014] highlight that AI applications can integrate climatic data with Indigenous phenological indicators to improve the accuracy of seasonal forecasting. This therefore improves accurate data-driven decision-making during agricultural planning. These can further be used to monitor compliance with traditional land-use restrictions, strengthening conservation enforcement and promoting the sustainable management of natural resources.

These insights were echoed in participant interviews, where an environmental officer noted that, "*AI assists in rapidly analysing satellite images to identify environmental threats, especially when combined with elders' deep knowledge of sacred sites*". Similarly, an Indigenous elder acknowledged that "*AI could serve to validate traditional observations but emphasised that technology must respect and collaborate with Indigenous ways rather than supplant them*". Collectively, these findings emphasise that Indigenous ecological knowledge provides vital context-specific indicators for environmental monitoring and conservation. AI complements this knowledge by offering enhanced analysis and forecasting capabilities. Hence, Indigenous ecological knowledge and AI form a scientifically robust and socially sustainable approach to climate-resilient conservation in Chivi District.

Table 2. Indigenous ecological indicators reported by participants

Indicator	Description	Frequency	% of Participants
Sacred groves	Areas preserved due to spiritual significance, often rich in biodiversity	26	86.7%
Phenol-biological signs (e.g., flowering)	Seasonal plant and animal behaviours used to predict rainfall and drought	21	70.0%
Zunde Ramambo	Communal grain farming to ensure food security during droughts	18	60.0%
Spirit mediums and rituals	Ancestral spiritual guidance in environmental decision-making	15	50.0%
Taboo-based land-use restrictions	Prohibitions on resource extraction in sacred or ecologically sensitive areas	17	56.7%

The findings of this study (Table 2) are strongly supported by existing literature that highlighted the importance of integrating (IKS) with modern technologies to enhance sustainable environmental management. Mavhura et al. [2016] emphasised the depth and contextual richness of Indigenous ecological knowledge, including sacred groves and phenological indicators, which are critical for climate-resilient conservation. This aligns with the study's participant insights and the conceptual framework grounded in Social-Ecological Systems and Knowledge Co-Production theories. The complementary role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is well-documented in environmental research for improving the precision and scalability of ecological monitoring and predictive analysis [Marumure and Makuvara 2022]. Furthermore, the study's focus on ethical data governance and community participation reflects Postcolonial Theory perspectives that advocate for decolonising research methodologies and protecting Indigenous data sovereignty Chibememe et al. [2014]. This integrated approach, which combines Indigenous knowledge with AI tools, aligns with best practices for socially just and scientifically robust conservation. It reinforces the potential of such applications to ad-

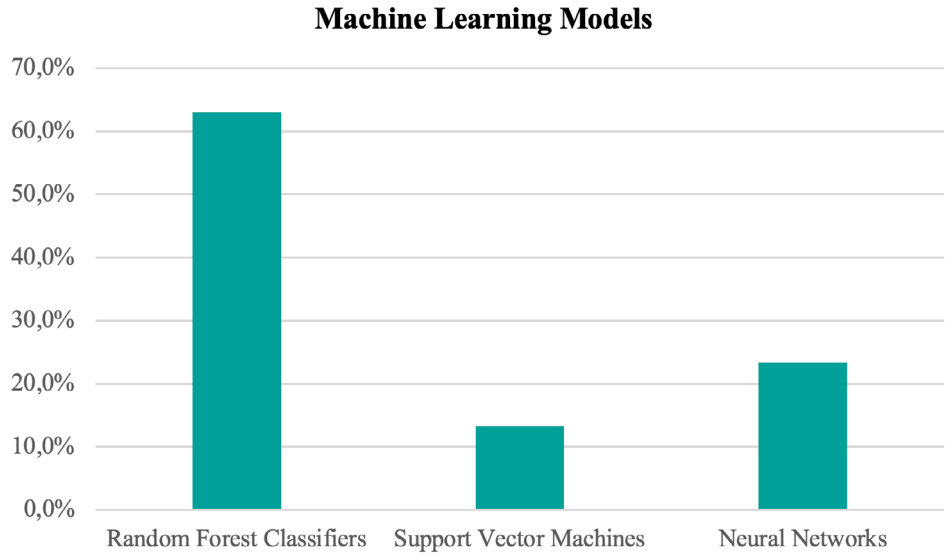
dress complex climate challenges while respecting and preserving cultural values.

5.3 AI Applications for Climate-Resilient Environmental Monitoring

The determination of the most appropriate AI applications for supporting climate-resilient environmental monitoring in Chivi District was derived through qualitative data. This was collected via semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 30 purposively selected participants, including Indigenous elders, traditional leaders, and environmental officers. These tools enabled a nuanced understanding of local environmental challenges, Indigenous ecological knowledge, and perceptions regarding the integration of Artificial Intelligence in conservation efforts. The interactive nature of FGDs facilitated collective validation of suitable AI techniques, reflecting the principles of Knowledge Co-Production Theory that emphasise collaborative generation of knowledge between Indigenous communities and technical experts.

The study collected data through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to identify the AI applications most appropriate for supporting climate-resilient environmental monitoring in Chivi District. The qualitative data revealed a strong preference for Random Forest classifiers, with 63.3% of participants endorsing this model due to its strength in handling complex, non-linear environmental data and its compatibility with Indigenous ecological indicators. Neural Networks were supported by 23.3% of respondents, noted for their ability to model intricate patterns, while Support Vector Machines (SVM) received 13.3% backing, primarily for their effectiveness in classification tasks. Furthermore, the importance of safeguarding Indigenous knowledge and data sovereignty emerged strongly in discussions, supporting the Postcolonial Theory embedded in the conceptual framework. Participants voiced concerns about ethical data handling and the necessity of ensuring that AI tools complement rather than supplant Indigenous practices. The AI applications developed using Random Forest, SVM and Neural Networks were seen not as replacements but as complementary decision-support systems. These can enhance local capacity for climate adaptation and forest conservation. These preferences were summarised in Table 3 below.

Fig 1. AI Applications Using Different Machine Learning Models



The study's findings indicated a significant preference for Random Forest Classifiers, with 63.3% (n=19) of participants, which were 7 environmental officers, 6 traditional leaders, and 6 indigenous elders. During Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), participants explained that the application that employed Random Forest had the ability to handle multiple inputs such as soil moisture, vegetation cover, and rainfall trends, which resonated with Indigenous ecological practices, which are themselves based on multiple natural indicators. One participant, a traditional leader, said that, "*Our ancestors never relied on one sign. They observed many things: the trees, the stars, the wind. So, if the machine can do the same with data, it will be very helpful to us*."

This insight supports the co-creation conceptual framework supporting the study, promoting complementarity between AI and IKS. According to Makondo and Thomas [2018], the success of technology in community-based conservation is linked to its alignment with local epistemologies. Therefore, the application model provided a technical analogy to the multi-indicator systems of Indigenous knowledge.

Conversely, the application model implementing Support Vector Machines (SVMs) was supported by only 13.3% (n=4), mainly younger environmental officers familiar with digital classification systems. FGDs revealed that while SVMs were acknowledged for their accuracy in binary classification, participants found them less intuitive and less flexible than Random Forests in real-world circumstances. Meanwhile, applications implementing Neural Networks received endorsement from 23.3% (n=7) participants, primarily young traditional leaders and two officers, due to their capacity to identify complex non-linear patterns. However, many elders and some leaders voiced ethical concerns, citing a lack of explainability and data transparency, core tenets in the conceptual framework and the AI ethics literature Chibememe et al. [2014]. One elder said that during an FGD:

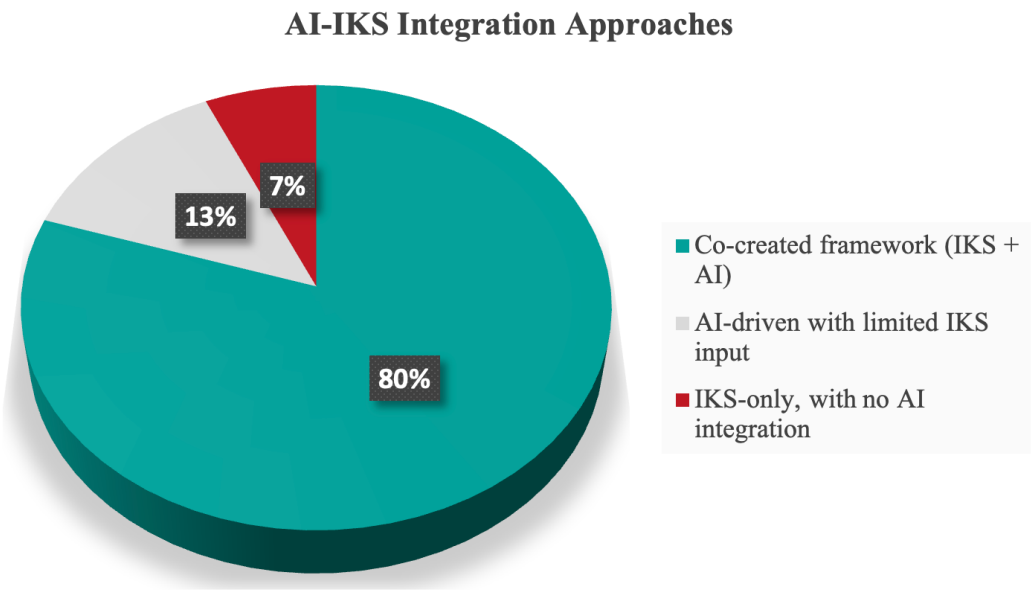
> *"If the system cannot explain why it gave a result, then it is not wiser than the people. We need to see the thinking of the tool."*

These findings reinforced the importance of participatory design, where Indigenous values and practices shape the selection and application of AI applications. The Random Forest's popularity is not only technical but also symbolic; it reflects a model that mimics Indigenous reasoning and pluralistic knowledge systems. The discussion confirms the conceptual framework of integration developed in the study, showing that culturally-aligned, interpretable AI applications have the highest potential for uptake and sustainability in forest and land conservation efforts in Chivi District.

5.4 Integrating Indigenous Knowledge and AI for Conservation

The integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) with Artificial Intelligence (AI) emerged as a critical theme from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Participants consistently emphasised that effective integration requires a respectful and collaborative approach. They noted that Indigenous ecological knowledge should serve as the foundational data input and validation point for AI applications. This aligned with Knowledge Co-Production Theory, advocating for the joint creation of knowledge through partnerships between Indigenous communities and scientific practitioners. The phenological events identified by elders were flowering or bird migrations signalling seasonal changes. These could be encoded as key ecological indicators within AI applications to improve the accuracy of environmental monitoring and prediction of climate impacts. The sacred groves and customary land-use maps could be digitised and integrated into geospatial AI analyses. Therefore enhancing the precision and cultural relevance of conservation zoning. Furthermore, the findings revealed that AI tools could analyse large-scale environmental data while being continuously calibrated and validated using Indigenous observations. This therefore revealed that AI complements rather than replaces traditional practices. This approach reflected Social-Ecological Systems Theory by recognising the interdependence between Indigenous communities and their environment. Hence, the findings suggested that the integration of IKS with AI through participatory and ethical frameworks can foster adaptive, scientifically strong, and socially sustainable forest and land conservation strategies.

Fig 2. Participant Preferences on AI-IKS Integration Approach



The findings of this study in fig 2 revealed a strong preference among participants for a co-created framework that integrates IKS and Artificial Intelligence (AI) for climate-resilient forest and land conservation in Chivi District. A significant 80% of respondents expressed support for a model that combines the wisdom of Indigenous practices alongside modern AI tools. This highlighted a growing awareness of the potential benefits of hybrid conservation strategies. These findings align with the co-production of knowledge framework proposed by Tengo et al. (2017), which advocates participatory approaches to environmental governance that integrate scientific and Indigenous knowledge systems. The conceptual framework developed in this study operationalises this approach by incorporating local ecological indicators, such as sacred groves, animal behaviour, and seasonal weather patterns, into AI applications, while ensuring community-led oversight and control of data processes [Mtupile and Liwenga 2017].

The demographic data revealed that the majority of participants were above the age of 40, and included a balanced mix of Indigenous elders, traditional leaders, and environmental officers. These groups bring diverse yet complementary insights; elders and traditional leaders contributed nuanced cultural and ecological knowledge, while environmental officers provided technical perspectives on how AI could enhance monitoring and decision-making[Mugabe et al. 2011]. In line with this, 91.7% of elders, 80% of traditional leaders, and 62.5% of environmental officers supported the co-creation model. One traditional leader remarked, "AI should not replace our ways but help us understand the changes faster. It must listen to our knowledge." This sentiment reinforces the position of Mavhura et al. [2016], who argue that for conservation to be effective and ethical, it must centre Indigenous agency and knowledge.

Findings from the focus group discussions (FGDs) added depth to these observations. Themes that emerged included the need for AI to be explainable and interpretable, respect for sacred knowledge, and a strong insistence on community data sovereignty. One participant stressed, "*Our land, our data,*" underscoring the importance of ethical AI use that does not exploit Indigenous communities. This resonates with the concerns raised by Chibememe et al. [2014] on the misuse of AI in traditional contexts without informed consent or cultural understanding. The participants emphasised that AI tools should function as amplifiers of Indigenous wisdom, not as replacements.

Additionally, the choice of AI applications indicated a preference for interpretable, robust tools. 76.7% of respondents favoured Random Forest classifiers, appreciating their ability to process multiple environmental variables while offering transparency. This suggests a deliberate preference for applications that can mirror the complexity of natural systems while remaining accessible to local stakeholders. Such a model fits into the socio-technical systems theory, where technology is shaped and made useful by the social systems into which it is embedded [Marumure and Makuvara 2022].

In conclusion, the study's findings strongly support the central aim: developing a community-informed, culturally respectful framework that combines the strengths of IKS and AI. By grounding AI model development in Indigenous ecological indicators and ensuring participatory governance structures, this research contributes to a decolonised approach to environmental management, one that values Indigenous epistemologies as valid and vital contributors to climate resilience.

6. Ethical, Cultural, and Practical Considerations

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) with Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in Chivi District surfaced several ethical and cultural challenges, as highlighted through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews. Participants voiced strong concerns over the potential misappropriation of sacred knowledge, misuse of ecological data, and the erosion of cultural practices if AI systems are developed without meaningful community involvement. One elder remarked, *"The trees and places we protect are not just resources; they are part of who we are. If computers take over without our voices, we lose our soul."* Therefore, such sentiments highlighted the importance of cultural sensitivity and the need for ethical AI design that respects Indigenous values. These concerns resonate with Postcolonial Theory, which critiques historical marginalisation and calls for equitable participation of Indigenous voices in technological interventions [Masinde 2015]. In order to address these concerns, participants recommended community-led data governance applications, emphasising data sovereignty, cultural protocols, and informed consent. Table 3 below summarises the key ethical and cultural challenges alongside proposed mitigation strategies.

Table 3. Ethical and Cultural Challenges Identified by Participants (n=30)

Challenge	Participants	Percentage (%)	Key Participant Group
Data Ownership Conflicts	18	85.7	Indigenous Elders, Env. Officers
Potential Misuse of Sacred Knowledge	16	76.2	Indigenous Elders, Traditional Leaders
Loss of Indigenous Autonomy	13	61.9	Traditional Leaders, Env. Officers
Concerns Raised by Environmental Officers (subset of above)	8	100	Environmental Officers

The data in Table 3 indicated that ethical and cultural challenges are a significant concern for 70% (21/30) of the study participants. 85.7% were worried about data ownership conflicts, 76.2% were concerned about the misuse of sacred knowledge, and 61.9% feared the loss of Indigenous autonomy. Indigenous Elders and Environmental Officers were particularly vocal about data ownership, while traditional Leaders expressed strong concerns about the protection of sacred knowledge. One Environmental Officer cautioned: *"Without proper safeguards, AI could marginalise Indigenous voices instead of empowering them."*

These findings corroborate the discourse on ethical AI presented by Muyambo and Maposa (2014). Their work emphasises the importance of transparency, fairness, and inclusive participation in AI deployment, particularly when sensitive cultural data are involved. Therefore, the study's conceptual framework incorporated culturally informed consent protocols, community-driven data stewardship, and continuous stakeholder engagement. These measures aim to safeguard Indigenous sovereignty over knowledge and data.

Furthermore, this aligned with Tengo et al. [2017]'s co-production framework, advocating that technology integration must respect and incorporate Indigenous worldviews to foster sustainable environmental governance. The participants' emphasis on data sovereignty and ethical safeguards situated the framework within a decolonial and socio-technical governance approach, ensuring AI serves as a tool for empowerment rather than exclusion.

7. Strategies for Indigenous Participation and Data Sovereignty

The findings revealed that effective integration of AI into conservation frameworks must be community-led, ethically governed, and grounded in culturally appropriate practices. Across all focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews, there was a shared emphasis on the need to preserve Indigenous autonomy, protect knowledge ownership, and ensure equitable participation in technological development. Participants collectively highlighted five key strategies (see Table 4).

Table 4. Recommended Strategies to Ensure Indigenous Participation and Data Sovereignty

Strategy	Number of Participants	Percentage (%)	Key Participant Group
Community-led AI Co-Design	25	83.3%	Indigenous Elders, Traditional Leaders
Culturally-Aware Data Governance applications	23	76.7%	Environmental Officers, Traditional Leaders
Legal Recognition of Data Sovereignty Rights	18	60.0%	Environmental Officers, Policy Stakeholders
Capacity Building for Digital Literacy	20	66.7%	Youth, Local NGOs
Use of Consent Protocols & Cultural Filters	22	73.3%	Indigenous Elders, Traditional Leaders

During an interview, one Indigenous elder remarked:

> *"Before any data is collected or shared, we must decide together. Our forests are not numbersthe, y carry spirits, stories, and laws."*

This reinforces Postcolonial Theory, which critiques extractive practices and demands the decolonisation of data and technology [Matunhu et al., 2022; Mutelo 2026]. It highlights the need to recognise Indigenous peoples not as data subjects but as data stewards and co-creators of AI systems. Similarly, the results align with Knowledge Co-Production Theory, which supports participatory design processes where AI applications are not imposed but rather developed in dialogue with Indigenous communities [Tengo et al. 2017]. One environmental officer in an FGD explained:

> *"AI tools are helpful, but they must be shaped by our traditions. If not, they will lead to the wrong decisions about the land."*

This finding also validated the Social-Ecological Systems Theory, which views ecosystems as dynamic and interlinked with social and cultural dimensions. Integrating AI into such systems requires context-specific approaches informed by local ecological knowledge, such as seasonal indicators, soil patterns, and wildlife behaviours unique to the Chivi District.

Mutasa [2015] argued that "*Indigenous data sovereignty is fundamentally about the right of Indigenous peoples to determine the means of collection, access, and use of data about their peoples, territories, and resources*", highlighting its centrality to self-determination in the digital era. In the same vein, Muyambo and Maposa [2014] emphasised that the exclusion of Indigenous peoples from data governance processes not only undermines trust but perpetuates epistemic injustice rooted in colonial histories. They emphasised that without Indigenous participation, AI systems risk reinforcing patterns of dispossession and invisibility. Furthermore, Mupepi [2022] cautions against technological paternalism, which is defined as the imposition of technological solutions on Indigenous communities without respect for their cultural protocols, consent, or epistemologies. These scholarly perspectives reinforce the need for community-led, culturally respectful, and ethically grounded AI integration strategies, as echoed by participants in this study.

The findings demonstrate that integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Artificial Intelligence can support climate-resilient forest and land conservation in Chivi District. The study highlighted the need for co-created, culturally sensitive frameworks grounded in ethical principles and community participation. The

conceptual framework developed operationalises these insights, positioning Indigenous indicators as vital inputs within AI applications, while safeguarding Indigenous worldviews and data rights.

8. Recommendations

- Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed for climate-resilient forest and land conservation in Chivi District:
- Promote collaboration among Indigenous elders, traditional leaders, and environmental officers in the design of AI tools to ensure they incorporate Indigenous ecological knowledge and remain locally relevant and culturally appropriate.
- Establish transparent data governance mechanisms that empower Indigenous communities to control and own data collected from their lands, protecting sacred knowledge and strengthening data sovereignty.
- Develop targeted AI literacy and capacity-building programmes to enable community members to participate effectively in AI development, application, and monitoring.
- Ensure that AI applications follow ethical standards based on informed consent, cultural sensitivity, and protection of Indigenous intellectual property.
- Incorporate locally relevant ecological indicators, including sacred groves, phenological events, and traditional rainfall prediction methods, into AI models to improve environmental monitoring accuracy.
- Maintain continuous engagement with Indigenous stakeholders throughout AI implementation to build trust, incorporate feedback, and adapt tools to changing ecological and cultural contexts.
- Encourage government and local authorities to develop policies that recognise Indigenous knowledge and promote community participation in AI-driven environmental governance.
- Strengthen partnerships among Indigenous knowledge holders, AI specialists, environmental scientists, and policymakers to co-create sustainable and effective conservation strategies.

Conclusion

The study employed a mixed-method approach to capture the rich ecological knowledge of Indigenous communities alongside the capabilities of Artificial Intelligence (AI) applications. The results demonstrated that integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) with AI can create a culturally sensitive and practical framework for climate-resilient forest and land conservation in Chivi District, Zimbabwe. These findings revealed that while this integration holds significant promise, ethical and cultural challenges such as data ownership and the protection of sacred knowledge must be carefully managed. Therefore, addressing these concerns through community-led governance and capacity building ensures the framework respects Indigenous autonomy and promotes ecological justice. This research contributed valuable insights and a conceptual model that supports sustainable environmental management, enhancing resilience to climate change in local ecosystems and communities.

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Crucifying the Alien: An interdisciplinary Critique of Xenophobic [Afrophobia] Violence against African Immigrants in South Africa.

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Abstract

The paper explores the ancient roots and contemporary dynamics of persistent xenophobic violence against immigrants in South Africa. The violence specifically targets African nationals, a phenomenon which has come to be theorised as Afrophobia. We argue that the foundation of this violence stems from the apartheid era, which institutionalised a culture where force and aggression served as the primary means to silence perceived political antagonists. Despite the persistence of these targeted attacks, scholars within philosophy and religion remain reluctant to engage with localised, non-state violence. In order to address this gap, we combine a philosophical and religious framework to analyse the socio-political, moral, and ideological dimensions of violence against fellow Africans. From a philosophical standpoint, we interrogate historical validations of violence, engaging liberal thinkers and Enlightenment perspectives on the French Revolution. In the same light, we apply *Ubuntu* ethics to evaluate human dignity, community, and ethical relationality. And, from a religious standpoint scrutinise the interplay between faith and hostility, questioning whether violence is innate to religion, at the same time drawing on biblical perspectives that frame scripture as a narrative of migrants. By fusing Christian theology with *Ubuntu*, the paper proposes a rounded inquiry of xenophobic violence and offers home-grown ethical solutions aimed at curbing Afrophobic attacks, and thereby promoting peaceful coexistence in South Africa.

Keywords: Xenophobia, Afrophobia, Ubuntu, Christianity, Violence

Introduction

In this paper, we argue that the major cause of the recurrent violent attacks on immigrants in South Africa can be traced back to the apartheid era. It is our conviction that a 'culture' of violence was created during the apartheid era whereby the use of force and violence silenced perceived political dissidents. Interestingly, the violence has deliberately targeted Africans and no other races, which in some circles has been labelled as Afrophobia. We then argue that, in light of the recurring violent attacks in South Africa, philosophy and religion as social science disciplines should offer their expertise and guidance in the quest to understand the phenomenon of violence. The two disciplines must proffer solutions that lead to the minimisation or curbing of violent attacks on immigrants in South Africa. On religion, we limit ourselves to Christianity and in philosophy, we will interrogate this violence using the African home-grown theory of *Ubuntu* to avoid generalisations.

Religion and philosophy have always been part of humanity. The questions we attempt to answer are: How are the relevant social, religious, political and moral questions raised by violence impacting society? Can violence be justified? How do we engage liberal philosophers such as John Locke and John Stuart Mill who support forms of war and colonialism, an inherently violent project? How do perceptions of the Enlightenment philosophers of the French Revolution [a violent eruption] a major event in the realisation of reason in the world? On the other hand, we also note with concern that there have been, and still are, misunderstandings and difficulties when it comes to understanding the relationship that exists between religion and violence. It has long been argued that most acts of violence seem to be exacerbated by religion. Is there sufficient basis to suppose that violence is inherent to religion? The Bible has been regarded in some circles as a "book of migrants" [Ex. 22:21; Dt. 14:21; 15:3; 32:8; Eph. 2:19; Phil. 3:20]. The other issue that we grapple with is the reluctant nature of philosophy and religion to deal with problems of violence. We note with concern that the only time that philosophers and specialists of religion attempted to look at the problem is when the discipline focuses on specific types of violence such as terrorism, torture and war. Nonetheless, today we continue to experience new forms of violent attacks on immigrants, as in the case of South Africa. The paper calls for a comprehensive and holistic analysis of the causes of violence against immigrants from a philosophical and religious perspective.

1. Conceptual Analysis

In this section, we try to understand the concept of violence and xenophobia vis-à-vis Afrophobia. Violence has been broadly defined by the World Health Organisation [WHO] as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation [as cited in Krug et al, 2002:6]. In their analysis of this definition, Krug et al. al [2002:6] note that WHO associates intentionality with the committing of the act itself, irrespective of the outcome it produces. Thus, the definition excludes unintentional incidents. The inclusion of the word 'power' and the phrase 'use of physical force' broadens the nature of a violent act and expands the conventional understanding of violence to include those acts that result from a power relationship, including threats and intimidation [2002:6]. The 'use of power' also serves to include neglect or acts of omission in addition to the more obvious violent acts of commission.

World Health Organisation developed a typology of violence that characterised the different types of violence and the links formed between them. In this characterisation, violence is divided into three broad categories, that is, self-directed, interpersonal, and collective violence [Krug et al. al, 2002:6]. Self-directed violence is subdivided into suicidal behaviour and self-abuse. Interpersonal violence can be in the form of family and intimate partner violence or community violence [Krug et al. al, 2002:6]. The former is violence that takes place between family members and intimate partners, though it is not exclusively confined to homes. The latter, however, is violence between individuals who are unrelated and who may or may not know each other, generally taking place outside the home [Krug et al. al, 2002:6]. The final category is that of collective violence, which is committed by larger groups of individuals or states. These crimes are motivated by a need for social, religious, technological, political or economic transformation [Krug et al. al, 2002:6]. Such violence as crimes of hate committed by organised groups, terrorist acts and mob violence are types of violent crimes aimed at advancing particular social agendas. Religious and political violence includes war and related violent conflicts, state violence and similar acts carried out by larger groups. Economic violence includes attacks by larger groups motivated by economic gain [2002:6]. Violence therefore manifests itself in different forms.

This paper is more concerned about collective violence as it is reflective of xenophobic attacks, which are crimes of hate committed by the community or mob to drive a social change. Post-apartheid South Africa has witnessed these acts of violence by local communities, groups or mobs targeted at foreign nationals or outsiders, especially Africans. The attack can be verbal, physical and economic. What exactly is xenophobia? For Wimmer [2007:66], 'xeno' means 'stranger' or 'foreign', and 'phobia' means fear. Mlilo and Masago [2019:2] define xenophobia as any acts of violence targeted at foreign nationals or "outsiders" because

of their being foreign strangers. They further indicate that it is an explicit targeting of outsiders for violent attacks despite other material, political, cultural, religious, and social forces that might be at play [2019:2]. Shindondola [2003:6] understood xenophobia as "a bitter outcome of the exertion of collective identity. This identity is characterised by the dominant ethnic, religious, economic and political demands". Yakushko [2009:44] considers xenophobia "as a form of attitudinal, affective, and behavioural prejudice toward immigrants and those perceived as foreigners".

The main characteristics of these violent attacks in South Africa include murder, assaults, looting, robbery, arson attacks, verbal attacks, displacement and threat of violence [2019:2]. Xenophobia leads to various forms of discrimination against foreigners and strangers, even though these foreigners are of the same skin colour as the local inhabitants. This is how we possibly have to understand violence in South Africa [especially xenophobia], where indigenous South Africans were exposed to inhuman brutality from the apartheid regime in their fight for freedom. Colonialism and apartheid created a condescending image of Africans, which some Africans have gladly worn. South Africans were locked away from their African neighbouring folks who made sacrifices for the liberation of South Africans. The lock-away resulted in traumatic cultural genocide as witnessed in many nations that experienced slavery, colonisation and the recent neo-imperialistic machinations. Had South Africans been liberated first ahead of other Africans, would they have used their haven and liberated African zone to liberate other Africans against colonialism? Violence has therefore become innate and criminal even against their African brothers and sisters; surprisingly, the xenophobic violence has spared non-African races. This, however, has prompted some scholars to argue that these attacks should not be termed 'xenophobia' but instead 'Afrophobia' [Black-on-Black conflict and violence directed at African nationals], a new form of racism [Hickell 2014 and Tafira 2011].

We, however, agree with the views of these scholars that the befitting name of these attacks is Afrophobia and not xenophobia. The Xenowatch reported that by the 31st of December 2018 they had recorded 529 xenophobic violence incidents that resulted in 309 deaths; 901 physical assaults, 2193 shops looted and over 100,000 people displaced [Mlilo and Misago 2019:2]. However, this is not to mean that these xenophobic and Afrophobic attacks are peculiar to South Africa since even Eastern and Western Europe also recorded and documented racist, xenophobic and Afrophobic crimes in countries such as Russia, China, Israel, Malaysia, Denmark, Germany, Greece, France, Ireland, Finland and the United Kingdom. The same xenophobic attacks have been reported in the United States of America.

2. Causes of Violent Behaviour vis-à-vis Xenophobic Attacks

We acknowledge that there is a plethora of literature on the causes of xenophobic attacks. These theories have tried to explain the causes of violence from different perspectives such as psychological, religious, anthropological, political economy, etc. However, we argue that most of these theories are developed in societies that are individualistic in nature. In South Africa, the major cited causes of xenophobia range from jealousy of foreigners' business success [Khosa and Kalatanyi 2014] to the allegations that foreigners were stealing South African women [Mnyaka 2003]; or that they accept below minimum wages [Nyamnojoh 2006]; or that they were stealing their jobs [Steinberg 2010; Tebeli & Mutelo 2023]. We believe that some of the solutions to xenophobia in Western societies, which are buttressed on individualism, may not be applicable in Africa in general and South Africa in particular, whose people are guided by principles of communalism inherent in the ethics of *Ubuntu*. We, however, hasten to say that this is not to romanticise the theory of *Ubuntu*. We do acknowledge that the theory has its own weaknesses, but we believe most of the weaknesses of the theory are as a result of colonialism bastardising and diluting the African culture which had its foundations in communalism. This can also be related to Christianity, which has a following amongst South Africans and their use of the Bible that calls for peaceful co-existence with others, especially immigrants. According to Edwards [2007], the Bible speaks much more about the treatment of immigrants, that is, the treatment of the stranger, the sojourner, or foreign resident in our midst, than it does about immigration policies that govern the influx of immigrants. We have biblical texts that focus on how strangers and aliens must be treated. We have the following selected texts:

Leviticus 19:33-34, which says,

> *When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born.*

Exodus 22:21, which says,

> *Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt.*

It is such texts that South Africans [most of whom are Christians] use to find them wanting when it comes to how they treat immigrants. The Bible and the moral law are against mistreatment or oppression of foreigners. Both the Old and New Testaments overwhelmingly affirm the ethic of hospitality to all people, including those in power, to immigrants. Foreign residents or Gentiles of ancient Israel enjoyed the same obligations to the community as Jews by being exhorted to share part of their agricultural produce with foreigners and the downtrodden every third year. This included aliens, Levites, orphans and widows [Dt. 14:28-29; 16: 9-15]. Christians find inspiration in texts that remind them as 'strangers and aliens" in this world [Eph. 2:19; Phil. 3:20] and citizens of heaven. Everything is viewed as passing, and our contact is depicted as contributing to our eligibility in heaven. Furthermore, when looking at crimes committed in the name of religion, we try to ascertain whether it is possible to distinguish the 'Church' that cannot sin from the 'sons and daughters' of the Church who committed atrocities in misguided zeal? Is violence inherent to religion? In Christian circles, the Bible seems ambivalent to issues of violence. Therefore, the Bible provides a rich source of anti-violent themes, humanist ideals and descriptions of idyllic peace and justice [Hassner and Aran, 2013:3]. The same Bible promotes crossings into other people's borderlands [Dt 10: 18-19; Heb 13:2; Ex 12:49; Mt 25: 35-40; Lev 19:33-34; Dt 27:19; Rom 12:13].

On the other hand, the Bible is a remarkably militant text that includes an extraordinary rage of aggressive themes and models, often confusing and contradictory. In the case of foreigners or immigrants or aliens who find themselves being segregated against or being placed under different obligations when it comes to what is regarded as "clean" food for the chosen ones and "unclean food" [Dt. 14:21] or non-exemptions from debts as foreigners [Dt. 15:3]. For example, Jewish law allowed Jews to sell or give unclean food or dead animals to foreigners, which possibly could have put foreigners or aliens in danger of disease. So in this case, violence is evidently evoked in the image of God, his treatment of humanity, the manner in which he demands to be worshipped, and the rules he sets forth for social control [Hassner and Aran, 2013:3]. Violence is also apparent in the chronicles of the Israelites, which are replete with war, genocide, and internecine conflict, as well as in prophecies that envision a turbulent end times [Hassner and Aran, 2013:3]. The Hebrew God is a "Lord of Hosts", vengeful and militant, who ruthlessly kills individuals, annihilates groups, and punishes humanity with plagues, brutal wars, and natural disasters [Hassner and Aran, 2013:3]. Just as in the case of xenophobic attacks, God commands killing on a 'chauvinist' basis: His chosen people are instructed to implement his fury, violent and segregative against inferior peoples that are accursed from conception, like the Ishmaelites, Moabites, Ammonites, and Edomites. It is not surprising that Boers used biblical violent texts to justify their superiority and access to resources over and against indigenous people. The element of superiority seems to define indigenous South Africans against fellow African nationals. The economic hierarchy defines their social and political contact.

In 2008, xenophobic attacks in South Africa left more foreign nationals dead. Fearing for their lives, many African immigrants settled in refugee camps ready to return to their countries of origin. The South African nation has experienced violence with xenophobic undertones for decades, but current waves in 2008 and 2018 have seen increased levels of intensity that targeted Africans. The South African government did not do much to protect African immigrants from vigilante groups who moved around or ran around half naked, moving from shop to shop claiming to deal with illegal immigrants. Vigilante groups usurped the powers of government and police, trying to determine who is documented or not documented. As a result, even documented immigrants were told to pack and go. In the end, South Africa will lose out as many people who went for studies in South Africa will withdraw, and this will promote white monopoly and capital. King [2012:554] describes violence, on one hand, as a condition of nature and on the other hand as a consequence of a damaged psyche. The violent attacks are a result of a psyche that was damaged during apartheid cha-

racterized by racial domination and exploitation of black people, at the same time safeguarding the interests of the colonisers. Pityana [1999:143] notes that apartheid was aimed at making sure that, "Africans should have a doubtful sense of identity and self-respect; their cultural systems and values were subordinated and marginalised in the land of their birth". Gobodo-Madikizela [2003:6] in his description of South Africa notes that, "every black South African has lived a life shaped by violence and the memories of Apartheid". Following these narratives and the violent xenophobic attacks, we are left wondering if indeed South Africans have gone past apartheid. Colonialism perpetuated attitudes of anti-blackness that are being witnessed in post- apartheid South Africa.

Margargee [as cited in King 2012:557] in his algebra of aggression explains how formerly 'over controlled' assaultive people, who are characterised by massive inhibitions against expressing or enacting aggressive feelings, overcome those inhibitions against expressing or enacting aggressive feelings, overcome those inhibitions and commit astonishing acts of violence. Applying this to South Africa, Kynoch [2016:65] argues that white minority rule in the country was maintained through different forms of violence. For him, controlling and exploiting the black population required an extensive and interlinked bureaucratic, judicial and coercive apparatus that directly subjected black South Africans to state violence and marginalisation [2016:65]. Kynoch [2016:65] further notes that the maintenance of white security and privilege fostered violence within many black communities, including crime, vigilantism, and communal conflict. It is only normal to expect that with the demise of apartheid these violent tendencies would also end, but alas that is not the case with democratic South Africa.

South African nationals' experiences during apartheid play a pivotal role in these recurrent xenophobic attacks. Landau [2005:9] argues that South Africa's long history of racial politics and stratification has had an important effect on how citizens perceive non-nationals. As Morris [1998:21] notes, in the pre-1994 era, the apartheid government imposed strict pass laws on the black population, causing movement restrictions effectively limiting South Africans' ability to mix, accommodate one another or tolerate differences amongst themselves and foreigners. Harris [2001:70] argues that the experience of oppression during apartheid, especially by black nationals, seems to have resulted in the mistrust and suspicion of outsiders. Force was used to maintain apartheid, thereby creating a 'culture of violence'. Harris [2001:14] describes it as a situation in which social relations and interactions are governed through violence, rather than non-violent means; a culture where violence is proffered as a normal, legitimate solution to problems. Following this line of thought, Misago et al [2009:10] attribute the present-day culture of communal violence and xenophobia to the apartheid era's brutal governance system. According to them;

> *During the Apartheid era, the threat of violence, whether 'vertical' [State against citizens] or 'horizontal' [citizens or rival political and social factions against each other], saturated the lives of South Africans residing in the volatile, tightly policed townships…. The effects of this historic fabric can be seen in the recent xenophobic attacks, when violence was justified by reference to the politics of housing and employment allocation as well as defending access to 'our women', and where criminal opportunism in some cases masqueraded under the evidently more acceptable guise of anti-foreign initiatives [2009:10].*

Julius Malema, in his apology to fellow Africans on xenophobia, indicates that fellow Africans should forgive the South Africans who were made to believe that they were better than Africa by their colonisers [YouTube]. The challenges go back to the African problem of slavery, colonialism, hunger, scarcity, war and theft, which are usually associated with Africans. Indigenous South Africans use the same colonial and imperialist template to regard and take immigrants as exclusively Africans and not other races. Black African South Africans suffer from Stockholm syndrome, where they love their former tormentors, who are whites who control 70% of the South African land, and they do not want Africans, hence Afrophobia. The Afrophobia led to violence, murder and repatriation of fellow Africans. The psychology of the oppressed is that they fear the oppressor so much that they resort to taking each other out as blacks or Africans, resulting in psychological alienation and sickness. Africans are the vandalised lot in terms of soul and spirit, which got removed from the African space. The African cultural software has been uploaded with pro-Western data where the colonial knee continuously sits on the neck of Africans and is celebrated. The loss of land gave birth to perennial violence that targets Africans as victims. So xenophobia, as the fear of the foreigner who is white, does not exist in South Africa, but the big problem is that of Afrophobia where Africans murder each other at the base

[Mngxitama]. The issue of Africans as migrants in Africa is a white construct meant to alienate Africans from their soil and spaces of life. The issue of borders is a foreign narrative that is used to exploit Africans as cheap labour in South Africa from neighbouring nations looking for jobs that are lowly paid ahead of locals whose services are perceived as expensive. On the other side, Africans from neighbouring nations see themselves as hardworking fellows, hence the reason why they get employed ahead of indigenous South Africans. The issue of borders is a white capital narrative where White settlers or Westerners do not fit in the Western template of immigrants. In fact, the Western imperialist template views white foreign nationals as employers and creators of employment and job opportunities. African immigrants are portrayed as criminals, dogs and thieves of opportunities. Apartheid cultivated the 'culture of violence' and violence against "blackness" and "Africanness" in the minds of the South Africans.

Malema invokes the ethics of *Ubuntu* and argues that Africans are not inherently violent, but are hospitable people and welcoming to strangers and foreigners [Youtube]. These xenophobic attacks are remnants of the violence that transpired during apartheid and are alien to the African people who are guided by their principles of *Ubuntu*. The theory of *Ubuntu* emphasises togetherness expressed by Mbiti [1969:108-9] as follows:

> *Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people. When he suffers, he does not suffer alone, but with the corporate group; when he rejoices, he rejoices not alone but with his kinsmen, his neighbours and his relatives whether dead or living. When he gets married, he is not alone, neither does the wife "belong" to him alone, so also the children belong to the corporate body of kinsmen, even if they bear only their father's name. What happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am". This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man.*

If 'I am because we are' is the golden rule of African personhood, yet Afrophobia negates African identity. What is happening in South Africa is self-negating and self-defeating when Africans fight or mistreat fellow Africans, which is a danger to African unity. It is a psychological catastrophe where the self tries to survive by destroying the roots of the 'we' that allows it to exist in the first place. For Desmond Tutu [2000:31], *Ubuntu* is, "…the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and is inextricably bound up in yours. I am human because I belong. It speaks about wholeness; it speaks about compassion". Also, Samkange and Samkange [1980:30] define hunhu/ubuntu as, "the attention one human being gives to another: kindness, courtesy, and friendliness in the relationship between people, a code of behaviour, an attitude to other people….". Speaking of relationships, Tempels [1959:29] argues that, created beings for the Bantu preserve a bond with one another, an intimate ontological relationship. For him, the world of forces was held together like a spider's web of which no single thread could be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network. Hence, to be is to be connected. A person is not a self-contained island [Gwara & Mutelo 2025]. Gyekye [1992:104] buttresses this by arguing that, "a person is not a palm tree that he should be self-complete or self-sufficient". His or her identity, power, and survival depend entirely on maintaining harmonious relationships in the community. Isolation in this kind of framework is non-existence. An individual or group of individuals exhibiting hatred and violence towards another African is the pathway to isolating themselves from the web of forces. This separation does not preserve their power, but it diminishes their vital force. Thus, Afrophobia ought to be understood as a form of self-weakening or 'spiritual suicide'; the act of attacking the "other", the people of South Africa, inherently drains their own life force. They fail to realise that in the cosmic web, to crush your brother is to chop off the very wire supplying power to yourself.

To further buttress that xenophobic attacks are un-African, we note that the causes of these attacks cited above, that is, jealousy, stealing of jobs and women, accepting of below minimum wages, are not sustainable to a people who are guided by a theory which encourages its individuals to be able to be welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous and willing to share. Yet most of the African immigrants created employment for the South Africans. As Koenane [2018:2] notes;

> *Such people are open and available to others, are willing to be vulnerable, are affirming of others and do not feel threatened that others are able and good, for they have a proper assurance that comes from knowing that they belong in a greater whole. They know that they are diminished when others are humiliated, diminished when others are*

oppressed and diminished when others are treated as if they were less than who they are.

The theory of *Ubuntu* guides the African people and emphasises respect for human dignity, hospitality, empathy, compassion and forgiveness among others. Explaining the African understanding of human dignity, Metz [2010:93] believes that it is a superlative non-instrumental value devoid of social construction. For Molefe [2020:814], dignity is the capacity to show moral sympathy towards the lives of others. All these African values emphasise the intrinsic value of all members of the community; immigrants included. The principles of *Ubuntu* are in sync with the teachings of Christianity. The principles, however, cannot be reconciled with Afrophobic violence that South Africa has witnessed, where people are tortured, and some are burnt alive. In support of the value of respect for human dignity, Teffo [1997:55] argues that;

The essence of man in Ubuntu or African humanism lies in the recognition of man as man, before financial, political, and social factors are taken into consideration. Man is an end in himself and not a means. He is a touchstone of value.

Hospitality is anchored upon the belief that a visitor does not exhaust food reserves. The proverb *mweni haapedzi dura* [a visitor does not exhaust the granary] best explains the rationale behind the African form of hospitality [Mandova and Chingombe 2013:103]. *Ubuntu* also emphasises togetherness, which is realised through empathy. This means taking up the burden for other people. This is expressed in the Shona proverb: *varume kutsva kwendebvu vanodzimurana* [men are all the same when their beards burn, they help each other to extinguish the fire] [Mandova and Chingombe 2013:102]. This proverb brings to the fore the idea that a person through *Hunhu/Ubuntu* should be in a position to be empathetic towards others. It is the feeling that should be exhibited among the people. People feel for others. Being able to feel for the other is the grounding good in *Hunhu/Ubuntu* ethics. Commenting on compassion, Mangayi [1983:49] says;

This quality of compassion has a lot to do with African humanism as people in various parts of the continent have lived it. Compassion, reaching out to others, is what this humanism is about: you are enlarged and increased when you go out of yourself. I am attracted to an existence in which people treat each other as human beings and not simply as instruments or tools, where people become committed to one another without necessarily having to declare such commitments. When the chips are down, it is compassion which makes it possible for others to rise to the occasion. Compassion integrates and binds people together.

Also, African communal relationships are based on reciprocity. The rationale in African worldviews is that *kandiro kanopfumba kunobva kamwe* [people are willing to give to those who give]; *kupa kuturika* [to give is to bank] and *kupa chipavhurire uchakodzwa* [giving opens good relations] [Mandova and Chingombe 2013:103]. *Hunhu/Ubuntu* enables people to take care of others. The Ndebele say *unyawo akalmpululo* [the foot has no rest], meaning people are constantly mobile [2013:103]. From this background, Africans believe that a person may find themselves in situations where they are also strangers or visitors. No one should look down upon others or despise others regardless of their social status. Finally, *Ubuntu* puts emphasis on forgiveness, and the people demonstrate a great capacity for forgiveness. As Kaunda [1980:179] argues, "If there is one thing the African people are supremely good at, it is forgiving their enemies." Forgiveness is believed to be necessary for the restoration of the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator.

3. Can Violence be ever Justified?

In philosophical circles, violence can only be understood in line with the philosophers' views on war. It is against this understanding that we will consider different views by different philosophers who justified wars, revolutions, and events that are characterized with violent acts. For John Locke, reason teaches the maturing individual to respect others' rights to their freedom and the extent to which an aggressor ought to be punished- "so far as reason and conscience dictate" [www.iep.utm.edu/locke]. In his writings, Locke's moral absolutism and even Old Testament ethic resurface-murderers and thieves deserve death, for a man has a right to destroy that which threatens his life. According to Locke, individuals possess the right of retaliation and defence against aggressors, who, by initiating force, thereby introduce a state of war, an unjustifiable

condition of violence and inequality that leads to enslavement [www.iep.utm.edu/locke]. The Old Testament also confirms the same attitude of retaliation in the case of being provoked. It confirms and celebrates violence [Gen.19:24-25; Ex. 12:29-32, 32:25-29; Josh 6:25, 7; Numb 21:1-3; Judg. 1:4-7, 1:25-2:3; 1 Sam 15; 1 Kings 18:39-40; 2 Kings 2:23-25; Dt 9:5, 12:31, 20:16-18]. It is only Jesus' ethics where we find retaliation and defence against aggressors being condemned or not encouraged [Mt 5:21-27]. Jesus encourages the victim of violence to work towards peace to the extent of accepting being harassed and tortured but not fighting back. For Verhey [1984], the Jesus ethic included the love command (part of righteousness) as a golden rule which is valid in its entirety. The love ethic defines righteousness as one for personal relations and the other for social relations, which applies to the whole life for all would-be Christians. Boring and Craddock [2004] add that Jesus ethics are not only touching on the physical deed but the intention of the heart. Any deed that endangers other human beings is unacceptable when read in the frame of Jesus' ethics, especially all forms of 'phobias'. But can a man be said to lose his rights if he aggresses against another? Hobbes thought that a man possessed an inalienable right to self-preservation, such that if he were to be executed [justly for murder, say] he would still possess the right to flee [www.iep.utm.edu/locke]. Furthermore, philosophers such as Hegel and Kant supported the French Revolution catalysed by violent periods of political turmoil. In his *Phenomenology of the French Revolution,* Hegel perceives the revolution as a necessity of the 'historical justice' [Mijuskovic 2012:2]. In *History of Philosophy,* Hegel argues that the revolution is the call for freedom of young years. For him, this is an important moment of freedom against the ruling old institutions [2012:2]. On the other hand, Beck [as cited in Axinn 1971:424], Kant's strong support of the French Revolution was not a matter of a moment's discretion but his constant position for a long time. Over and above all, Kant took the French Revolution to be a step in mankind's approach to the kingdom of ends, to a situation in which there would be perfect dignity and self-determination for every human being.

It is clear from the discussion above that philosophers who justified violence did so on the basis that they viewed it as a legitimate and inevitable right of the oppressed. This is something against the xenophobic or Afrophobic violence in South Africa where the black majority poor attack and kill African poor immigrants. If the xenophobic violence targeted the rich Western owners of capital or rich African business people, it would have been regarded as a revolution by the poor about fair distribution of resources and access to wealth. The xenophobic or Afrophobic violent acts are far from the above. Some critics have argued that the violence is possibly manufactured and managed/controlled by white capitalists in collaboration with African political and religious elites to divert South African indigenous plight of poverty. Thus, Proudhon's radical anarcho-syndicalism conceived the workers' uprising as the total annihilation of the enemy, a goal toward which every form of violence would in principle be justified [Avelar 2004:5]. Marx adds that, for the justification of violence on the basis of the violence upon which the present capitalist order of things was founded [the horrors of past, primitive expropriation and accumulation, duly reproduced in the present]. For him, this offered the definitive rationale for violence in the future. This marks Marxism's ethical basis of the vindication of violence. We can relate this to the liberation struggle violence towards independence in South Africa and Zimbabwe. The case of Mandela and violence meted out on Africans; we can look at forms of apartheid and possible influence on xenophobia in South Africa. Samkange and Samkange [1980:49] note that the former Ndebele king Lobengula, when the whites came into his state and were causing havoc, said: "I will not begin war, I wish to remain at peace, but if I am attacked I shall defend myself". This explained the nature of hospitality that the Ndebele exhibited. However, the whites saw this as a weakness that could be exploited. However, over and above all, the principles of *Ubuntu* will not justify xenophobic attacks, for these tend to dehumanise both the perpetrator and the victim. At best, *Ubuntu* preaches restoration as an attempt to bring peace and mend relations between individuals.

Conclusion

As witnessed above, violence can be justified in some cases and not in others. For the most part, philosophers believe that every individual has a right to self-preservation. Following this line of thought, violence can only be justified in cases when [1] one is responding to aggression [2] one is fighting for freedom from oppression. It is clear from the above two scenarios that neither justifies Xenophobia and Afrophobia as we

have it in contemporary society. The South African nationals are in no way defending themselves against any aggressor; in fact, they are the aggressors against their fellow African immigrants who intend to create inequalities in society, which makes the use of violence unjustifiable. The persecution targeted even those with papers or legally approved to stay in Botswana. Also, in the second case, the South African nationals are in no way oppressed and are not using violence to obtain freedom, so in this case xenophobia and Afrophobia cannot be justified.

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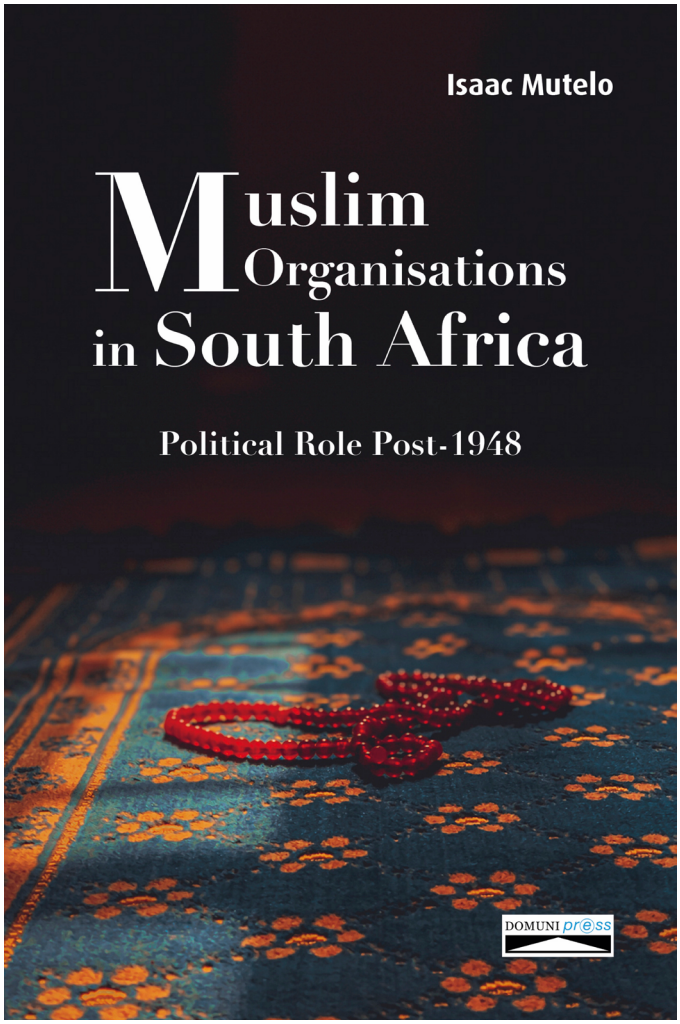
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[Book Review] Isaac Mutelo, *Muslim Organisations in South Africa. Political Role Post-1948.*

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The insightful foreword of *Muslim Organisations in South Africa: Political Involvement Post 1995,* Sheik Mohammed Ntshangase from the University of Limpopo, highlights the book's significant contribution to understanding the impactful roles played by Muslim organisations and individuals in South Africa since 1948. He notes, "The book is a major contribution in uncovering laudable works that Muslim organisations and individuals in South Africa have done post-1948. Unlike many who ignorantly slander Islam, Isaac Mutelo stands out by thoroughly seeking knowledge and understanding."

Despite constituting only 2% of South Africa's total population, the Muslim community has made substantial contributions to various political spheres, particularly in promoting religious freedom, fostering reconciliation, and spearheading humanitarian and social welfare initiatives. The book highlights the varied political engagement of Muslim organisations; some adopt a "watchdog" approach, actively engaging with the government. The political landscape for Muslims in South Africa has evolved, particularly in the 1990s, with the formation of several Muslim political parties, including Al-Jama-ah, the Islamic Party, the African Muslim Party, the African Moral Party, and the Sizwe Ummah Nation. Additionally, many Muslims have aligned themselves with broader political movements, such as the ANC and the PAC, while social movements like People Against Gangsterism and Drugs and the Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa have emerged to address community issues. Notably, humanitarian efforts are exemplified by the Gift of the Givers Foundation, recognised as the largest Muslim NGO in the country.



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The book also pays tribute to individuals who have held prominent political positions, including Dullar Omar, Kader Asmal, Aziz Pahad, and Hassan Solomons, who have served in various government ministries as members of parliament. It recounts the contributions of key figures in the struggle for democracy, such as Ahmed Kathrada, and more recent political stalwarts like Ebrahim Patel, Naledi Pandor, and the late Jessie Duarte.

A significant aspect of the book is its historical context regarding Islamic immigration to South Africa, detailing three phases. In the mid-17th century, Dutch colonizers brought Muslims as slaves and political exiles from Malay, Java, and Bengal to settle in the Cape. The mid-19th century saw British colonisers bringing Indian Muslims as indentured laborers to Natal. The end of the 19th century and the early 20th century witnessed a wave of Indian traders and merchants settling in Natal, followed by an influx of Muslim immigrants from Africa and Asia, along with conversions within South African communities in the early 20th century.

The book raises essential questions concerning the political engagement of Muslim organisations. It probes whether there is a singular approach to politics that can be defined as "Muslim politics," suggesting that there is no one-size-fits-all answer, as Muslims are actively involved in various political parties, including the ANC, EFF, and PAC. It also questions whether Muslim organisations should primarily advocate for Muslim-specific issues such as identity, security, and values, or whether their focus should extend to universal issues, including justice, poverty, and development. Furthermore, it explores what occurs when Muslim organisations and individuals hold differing political views.

Thus, *Muslim Organisations in South Africa: Political Involvement Post 1995* offers a comprehensive examination of the political dynamics within the Muslim community in South Africa, highlighting both historical context and contemporary issues. Isaac Mutelo's thorough exploration invites readers to reflect on the complex balance between religious identity and broader societal responsibilities.

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