

AFRICAN RELIGIONS AND ETHICS

The Notion of Ethical Non-Dualism

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Abstract: The overwhelming majority of people in the contemporary world *belong to* and *believe in* some form of religious tradition, although the degree and commitment to their chosen religion may well be highly individualistic. Given this critical and massive numerical index, religion and ethics are potentially and powerfully vital in addressing many societal problems and how humans exercise and articulate their humanity. Most religions have ‘ethics’ as a code of ‘moral beliefs and values,’ embedded within the fabric of the tradition itself. This essay works on the premise that ethics, as value laden scripts and sets of relational belief and behaviour, are dynamically informed and richly nourished by the religious and spiritual traditions within which they are conceptually entangled. The essay focuses on the traditions of Advaita Hinduism and African Traditional Religions and raises a discussion on their non-dual philosophic perspective through the lens of relationality and the African notion of *ubuntu*.

Key Terms: Ethics, Relationality, Non-Dualism, Connected, *Ubuntu*, African Traditional Religions, Advaita, and Hinduism.

1. Introduction

We live in a post colonial world that has rapidly globalised, and although exhilaratingly complex and sophisticated in technological terms, still appears alarmingly ‘primitive’ and sadistic in the manner in which many aspects of human relations are articulated. Such articulations, on a micro scale, show themselves as invidious violations of basic human rights and dignity in everyday routinized social interactions, while on a macro-level, they play out in extreme scenarios of ethnic violence, rape and genocide. Religion has of course not been impervious to this but has raised its voice against what it sees as a violation of fundamental human rights. One concurs with William Schweiker that “globality itself is a moral space in

which peoples must orient their lives.”¹ What Schweiker is referring to among other things, is a sense of an ethical social enactment that becomes even more imperative within a globalised world.

While one is cognisant that there are communities of people who legitimately self-identify as agnostic and atheistic, it is equally true that the overwhelming majority of people in the contemporary world *belong to* and *believe in* some form of religious tradition, although the degree and commitment to their chosen religion may well be highly individualistic. Given this critical and massive numerical index, religion and ethics are potentially and powerfully vital in addressing many societal problems and how humans exercise and articulate their humanity. Most religions have ‘ethics’ as a code of ‘moral beliefs and values,’ embedded within the fabric of the tradition itself. It remains contested whether an ethical scaffold can exist *without* a normative religious matrix, within which such an ethical framework takes root. This essay works on the premise that ethics, as value laden scripts and sets of relational belief and behaviour, are dynamically informed and richly nourished by the religious and spiritual traditions within which they are conceptually entangled.

Religions, through the values they embody, often build the foundational edifice for what is considered ‘right’ and ‘wrong’.² Often, the religious worldview intimately informs and sculpts the particular shape and articulation of ethical principles. Often beliefs and practices, about what individuals consider ‘moral’ have been formed in the structures of their particular religious community. According to the scholars Parboteeah, Hoegl and Cullen, religion produces “both formal and informal norms and provides people with a freedom/constraint duality by prescribing behaviours within some acceptable boundaries.”³ Although they do not critically engage with the contested notion of what exactly ‘morality’ may mean for particular communities of people, Parboteeah et al go as far as adding that, “strong belief in religion suggest that people

¹William Schweiker, “A Preface to Ethics: Global Dynamics and the Integrity of Life,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 32, 1 (2004), 13-37, 37.

²J. H. Turner, *The Institutional Order*, New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, 1997.

³Praveen K. Parboteeah, Hoegl Martin and John B. Cullen, “Ethics and Religion: An Empirical Test of a Multidimensional Model,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 80 (2008), 387-398, 387.

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have a foundation for a moral life.”⁴ Many religions like African Traditional Religions (ATR) lay claim to their own constructed understandings of prescribed scripts and behaviours for leading a ‘better’ and ‘good life.’ Opoku reminds us that “African traditional religions is practiced by millions of Africans” and it is therefore a “contemporary reality.”⁵ ‘Belief in the ancestors’ is one universal brick in the conceptual architectural matrix of African Traditional Religions. Another such architectural brick is the notion of *ubuntu*.

Much has been written about African Traditional Religions (ATR) and the concept of *ubuntu* as an ethical principle. This exploratory essay seeks to engage with some of the ontological and conceptual underpinnings around the polysemic ethical notion of *ubuntu*. More specifically, the essay wishes to contribute to the intellectual conversation by bringing into dialogue, through the lens of *ubuntu*, particular(istic) notions of non dualism within African Traditional Religions and the Advaitic Hindu religious tradition. Being part of the diasporic Indian and Hindu community and having been born in South Africa, I have been exposed to the richness of a multi-cultural and multi-faith plural society. What the notion of *ubuntu* within African Traditional Religions ‘speaks to me and for me,’ resonates with notions of interconnectedness within Advaita. This organic ‘location’ offers me both a personal and intellectual rationale for positioning a dialogue between the two traditions in a manner that also speaks to notions of a ‘meeting of horizons’ in a Gadamerian way, a point that I return to in the final section.

Such a dialogue is not meant to conceptually ‘flatten’ and essentialise either one of the religious traditions, in a facile attempt to present them in a homogenous manner. The aim is to locate areas in Advaitic Hinduism that discursively concur with the concerns of African Traditional Religions and ethics, and to explore the contours of areas of

⁴Parboteeah, et al, “Ethics and Religion,” 387.

⁵K. A. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, Accra: FEP International Private Ltd., 1978, 9. Opoku states that African Traditional Religions refers to the aggregate of indigenous belief systems and practices which existed in Africa prior to the coming of Christianity and Islam and to which millions of Africans still adhere; covertly or overtly. The term ‘traditional’ is used to refer to the technique of cultural transmission, that is, oral tradition – stories, myths and proverbs – used in passing the religion inter-generationally through songs, folktales, dances and festivals. The term, ‘traditional’ indicates a fundamentally indigenous value system that has its own pattern, with its own historical inheritance and tradition from the past.

the semblance. Thus, the endeavour is to look for conceptual resonances between the two traditions that speak to a non-dualistic and more interconnected understanding of humanity, emanating in turn *from* such a non-dualistic stance.

2. The Concept of *Ubuntu*

Perhaps the most unambiguous thing that one can say about *ubuntu* is that the word belongs to the African *Nguni* group of languages, and has cognates in other (east and southern African) Bantu languages. This is a somewhat straightforward description of the linguistic roots of the word *ubuntu*. The import and semiosis of the word is much more difficult to capture. As is often the case, the meaning evades full (cross cultural) translation and can perhaps best be translated into English as “humanness, or being human.”⁶ However, this is in itself an overly simplified signification of the word (and notion), which appears across the literature to be multivalent and polysemic. Many writers approaching a discussion of the concept point to popular aphorisms which appear to capture the essence of the concept, on an ethical and relational level. One common aphorism states that “People are not individuals, living in a state of independence, but part of a community, living in relationships and interdependence.”⁷ Said differently, *a person is a person because of others* or *Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu*.

Such a relational perspective appears in much of the scholarship as the hallmark of the ethical principle of *ubuntu*. In terms of ethical imperatives, *ubuntu* means ‘humanity,’ ‘humanness’ or ‘humaneness;’ but even more importantly that *humanness* or humanity exists because of the ‘other’ and is knitted to a relational perspective. My interest in the concept is the underlying ontological perspective that feeds such a tightly braided social relationality and reciprocity. The notion of reciprocity generally involves returning or giving back ‘like behaviour with like,’ and refers to a particular taxonomy of social interactions. *Ubuntu*, however, presupposes a recognition of the true ontological worth of the human being that demands a particular kind of ‘care ethic’ or recognition of the common humanity. The traditional African aphorism such as *Umuntu Ngumuntu*

⁶Reuel J. Khoza, *Let Africa Lead: African Transformational Leadership for 21st Century Business*, Johannesburg: Vezubuntu, 2006, 6.

⁷Yusufu Turaki, *Foundations of African Traditional Religion and Worldview*, Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers, 2006, 36.

Ngabantu – ‘A person is a person because of others’ is, thus, meant to articulate basic respect, care and compassion for others.

There has been much written, within social science scholarship to render the concept of *ubuntu* visible in contemporary discourse as well as within multi-cultural and global discourses on ethics.⁸ The concept of *ubuntu* is thus not unheard of ‘outside’ of its local African context – as many western scholars have written on it. However, the South African scholar Dirk Louw quite rightly states that for the average (lay) Westerner, (schooled in a strong sense of individualism) the maxim ‘a person is a person through other persons’ has no obvious religious connotations, adding that they would most likely interpret it as a general appeal to treat others with respect.⁹ He reiterates, however, that, in African tradition and in a socio-religious and relational sense, *the person is [only] a person ‘through other persons’*.

⁸Magobe Ramose (*African Philosophy through Ubuntu*, Harare: Mond Books, 1999) looks at African Philosophy through the exegetical lens of *ubuntu*, while the Dutch scholar WMJ Vim van Binsbergen, (“Ubuntu and the Globalisation of Southern African Thought and Society,” *Quest*, 15, 1/2 [2002], 53-89), looks at the concept of *ubuntu* and the globalisation of Southern African thought and society. Ramose’s work seeks to contextualise *ubuntu* within the wider cosmological and metaphysical framework of African philosophy, while van Binsbergen’s interest is the contemporary ramifications and possibilities of the ethical imperatives of *ubuntu* within the context of globalisation and the post colony. Similarly Dirk Louw’s⁸ paper (“*Ubuntu* and the Challenges of Multiculturalism in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” *Quest* 15, 1/2 [2001]), is an attempt to relate *ubuntu* to the specificities and situatedness of a modern-day multicultural society. Barbara Nussbaum’s (“African Culture and *Ubuntu*: Reflections of a South African in America,” *Perspectives* 17, 1 [2003]), work is a broadly constructed reflective piece on African culture and *ubuntu*, and she draws on the various expressions and manifestations of *ubuntu* ethics by leading socio-political South African and iconic personalities such as Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. There has been likewise, from the Social Sciences alone (not to mention the fields of law, management, human resources, etc.) also a large body of postgraduate student work engaging with the concept of *ubuntu*. One such example from a vast pool of students’ works is Domoka Lucinda Manda’s thesis (*The Importance of the African Ethic of Ubuntu and Traditional African Healing Systems for Black South African Women’s Health in the Context of HIV and AIDS*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2007) which works to situate African ethics (and *ubuntu*) in global culture.

⁹Dirk J. Louw, “*Ubuntu: An African Assessment of the Religious Other: 20th World Congress of Philosophy*, Boston, Massachusetts: University of the North, 1998.

3. Relationality and Non-Dualism in ATR and Advaita Hinduism

African Traditional Religions and Advaita Hinduism¹⁰ may appear worlds apart at first glance. As religious and philosophical systems, they are of course particular and distinct with their own epistemological and ontological specificities. There are, however, some resonances between the two. While the continent of Africa and the subcontinent of India are indeed geographically removed, some of the concepts in the religious traditions of (Advaita) Hinduism and African Traditional Religions can be brought into meaningful dialogue and conversation. For one, African Tradition Religions¹¹ and Advaita Hinduism are both exemplified as philosophies of indivisible whole-ness, or said differently as non-dualisms (although conceptualised differently).

While Advaita is part of the multiple traditions of Hinduism, African Traditional Religions refers to the indigenous religion(s) of the several African communities in sub-Saharan Africa. Like Hinduism, which is richly multiple and multivalent, there is no one single African community, but a rich cluster of plural African groups dispersed across sub-Saharan Africa. Each has richly unique cosmological and religio-cultural features that distinguish and situate them in their geographical contexts of origin. The overarching worldview of African Traditional Religions, however, knits together and presents a particular understanding of the world, in a manner that offers a natural collapse of a Cartesian dualistic disjuncture of this world and the next.¹² There is also on an ethical relational level, a

¹⁰I am referring to specifically the Advaita philosophical stream of Hinduism rather than Hinduism in general. Several comparative religionists have pointed out that the generic term ‘Hinduism’ is quite often indiscriminately passed off to mean the Brahmanic Hindu religion of (predominately, although not exclusively) many middle class Hindus. While this is a legitimate expression of the Hindu religion, it is by no means the exclusive profile of the religion. For ‘Hinduism’ contains within the plural folds of its worldview/s, also the religious tenets of those who also refer to themselves as Hindu, yet remain outside mainstream Brahmanic Hinduism, such as the scheduled castes grouped under the rubric of the term Dalits, as well as the large rural populace of India that practices Mother or Amman worship, and other tribal religions. Hinduism also references the philosophical traditions of the various philosophical schools of Vedanta, of which Advaita is one.

¹¹Tarisayia Chumuka, “Ethics among the Shona,” *Zambezia* 28, 1 (2001), 23-37, 30.

¹²The point is that although it is true that many features of the religion and its practice are similar across Africa, it would be fallacious to assume some sort of

collapse of any disjuncture between one person and the next, even if that ‘person’ has passed on and entered the realm of the ancestors.¹³

Within African Traditional Religions (which has largely been an oral tradition), Ramose refers to non dualism by pointing out that though linguistically separate, *ubu-* and *-ntu* (that make up *ubuntu*) are not metaphysically distinct, and that they are two aspects of the same reality. Referring to *ubu* and *ntu*, Ramose says:

On the contrary, they [*ubu* and *ntu*] are mutually founding in the sense that they are two aspects of be-ing as a one-ness and an indivisible whole-ness. Accordingly, *ubuntu* is the fundamental ontological and epistemological category in African thought of the Bantu-speaking people. It is [also] the indivisible one-ness and whole-ness of ontology and epistemology.

Ubu, as the generalized understanding of be-ing, may be said to be distinctly ontological, whereas, *-ntu*, as the nodal point at which be-ing assumes concrete form or a mode of being in the process of continual unfoldment, may be said to be distinctly epistemological.¹⁴

Within Advaita, the Upanishadic literature presents seminal ideas on non-dualistic thinking and the later intellectual giants Sankara and Ramanuja came to adopt these ideas and cohere them into their particular philosophical streams. Both Sankara’s eighth century non-theistic *Advaita* as well as Ramanuja’s thirteenth century theistic *Visistadvaita* have a common genealogy and claim their ancestral and intellectual roots in the

essentialism and that all African religion(s) is the same. Hence, it has been suggested by scholars working within African Religious studies, that the more accurate label for the religions of Africa, is the pluralistic form of ‘African Religions’ or ‘African Traditional/Indigenous Religions,’ to reflect the rich contextual and geo-spatial plurality within the continent’s religious landscape. Thus the main shared and overarching characteristics of African Traditional Religions is the belief in a Supreme Being, who is recognized and acknowledged as the Creator, known as presiding over spirit beings and lesser deities, and a multitude of benevolent and malevolent deities. The Supreme Being is considered and accepted as the Universal, but the spirits and deities are understood as local. African Traditional Religions also teaches the belief in the finitude of the human person and the belief in mystical causality and an intentional universe. See Maheshvari Naidu, “Transcendent Genealogy and Kinship Relations: Afterlife in African Traditional Religions,” *Journal of Dharma* 34, 7 (2012), 411-426.

¹³Naidu, “Transcendent Genealogy and Kinship Relations.”

¹⁴Magobe B. Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*, Harare: Mond Books, 1999, 49.

Upanishads. Within Advaita is the frequently quoted utterance of *tattvamasi*¹⁵ as expounded in the Vedanta Sutras of Badrayana. Using this ‘great utterance’ or *mahavakya*, Sankara unpacks a philosophy of ‘not two’, where Atman and Brahman are grasped as non-dual. This Brahman is to be arrived at by a series of negations as mentioned in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, “Brahman is not this ... Brahman is not that,” *neti, neti*, where, having negated everything that exists (in both material and non-material terms) one ‘arrives’, having never been anywhere else, at the Brahman-Atman identity.

The Advaitin’s exegetically unpacking of this scripture informs the Advaitic doctrine¹⁶ of two levels of ‘reality’: *vyāvahārika* or the phenomenal, relative reality, where duality is experienced, and the realm of *pāramārthika*, or transcendental non-dual reality. Etymologically, *advaita* means the negation of all duality.¹⁷ Within Advaita, there are thus the so called dualisms of Atman and Brahman that are in a sense radically and hierarchically different on one level, at the phenomenal and relative realm, but emerge as ‘no different’ once the individual has attained liberation. At this point dualisms and embedded hierarchies are not only non-existent – they are understood as never having existed.¹⁸ According to Bauer, Advaita holds to the teachings of the Upanisads, Brahmasutras and similar sacred texts. She claims that the system accounts for the anomalies that characterize everyday (subject-object) experience by “linking ontological and epistemological notions” and “equating our imperfect state of being with our imperfect state of knowing.” Advaita prescribes a method for overcoming ignorance (*avidya*) which involves the attainment

¹⁵This *mahāvākya* has of course lent itself to multiple hermeneutical analysis. Using this great utterance Ramanuja describes a loving theistic Brahman within which the individual Atman is both the same *and* different, while the dualistic philosopher Madhva describes the statement also in theistic referents, but dualistically, Brahman and Atman are different.

¹⁶In Sankara’s Advaita Vedanta the ultimate duality is that of the Atman Brahman (perceived) duality that has to be transcended through an experiential realization of *tat tvam asi*.

¹⁷M. P. P. Penumaka, “Luther and Shankara: Two Ways of Salvation in the Indian Context,” *Dialog* 45, 3 (2006), 252-262, 257.

¹⁸B. Sriraman and W. Benesch, “Consciousness and Science: An Advaita Vedantic Perspective on the Science Theology Dialogue,” *Theology and Science* 3, 1 (2005), 131-147, 143.

of perfect philosophical knowledge of non-duality, and thus leads to the reward of spiritual fulfilment.¹⁹

Returning to African Traditional Religions, Ramose asserts that, in the case of *munhu/umuntu*, the prefix *mu/umu* is like *hu-/ubu-* in the sense that *hu-/ubu-* designates general being, while *mu-/umu-* is a specific instantiation of being. *Munhu/umuntu* depicts human beings, as the originator of social institutions, which need to adhere to certain ethical principles. *Umuntu* is said to be the specific concrete manifestation of *umu-*: it is the movement away from generalised to concrete. *Umuntu* is the specific entity.²⁰ One is of course necessarily wary of drawing overly simplistic epistemological and ontological commonalities. However, working from a comparative stance, one can sketch some conceptual links of ‘similarity’ (rather than commonality) with Advaita Vedanta’s epistemological framing of Atman-Brahman, where the true nature of Brahman is to be arrived at by the sublimation of dualities. Brahman can be ‘loosely’ compared to General Being, *Ubu* (Brahman) *as the generalized understanding of be-ing*, where *hu-/ubu-* designates general being, and *mu-/umu-* is a specific instantiation or concretisation of ‘being’ (Atman).

In terms of ethical social enactments within African Traditional Religions, Maxwell Musingafi and Patrick Chadamoyo explain that *munhu* is complex, multifaceted, and is generally understood at two levels- the lower and higher tier. According to them, at the so called lower level *munhu* means the physical body of a human being. At the higher level “*munhu* becomes the physical body” as well as “other *extras*.”²¹ It is a somewhat odd manner of phrasing. However, by ‘extras’ Musingafi and Chadamoyo are referencing the mutuality and relationality of *ubu* and *ntu*, and alluding to Ramose’s explanation of the ontological basis for ethics that seeks to give social meaning to what is perceived as an ontological truth; the indivisibility or wholeness of humanity.

¹⁹ Nancy F. Bauer, “Advaita Vedanta and Contemporary Western Ethics Philosophy East and West,” *Philosophy East and West*, 37 (1987), 36-50, 38.

²⁰ Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*, 49-51.

²¹ Maxwell C. C. Musingafi and Chadamoyo Patrick, “*Munhu*: Unlocking the Roots, Indigenous Knowledge for Development,” *Developing Country Studies* 3, 3 (2013), https://www.academia.edu/3185311/Munhu_Unlocking_the_Roots_Indigenous_Knowledge_for_Development.

Ubuntu thus has definitional complexity²² and Waghid and Smeyers tell us that it is “pervasive and fundamental to African socio-ethical thought, as illuminating the communal rootedness and interdependence of persons, and highlighting the importance of human relationships.”²³ The last quotation, for me is a powerful one, for it points to why an ethical framework is so vital within religious traditions. It is the ethical framework that dictates how we perform ourselves humanely in this world. It is the ethical scripts rather than ontological and metaphysical descriptions that are most meaningful to the lay person. One can argue that this is especially so in the global south and geopolitical contexts gripped by indices of poverty and unemployment, famine, genocide, child mortality and the pandemic of HIV/AIDS. All of these are true in the context of sub-Saharan Africa. Many African families, dislocated from rural family homes to overcrowded urban spaces, and who are forced to migrate in search of economic opportunities within the informal sector, form what is known as fictive kinship ties; creating non biological ‘families’ in the absence of blood related kin. This is common when biologically related family members are often torn apart due to obligatory labour migration, and children are orphaned within the realities of a continent in the shadow of HIV/AIDS. Studies²⁴ have shown that these fictive kinship ties operate on well-established ideas of communal rootedness and interdependence. Many of the participants interviewed in these studies mention the notion of *ubuntu* and reference their own familiarity with the concept. Thus the notion is not only the currency of scholars, pastors and ministers, but most importantly, it appears to be in the consciousness of the lay people. All of this lends credence to Waghid

²² Idoniboye-Obu Sakiemi and Ayo Whetho, “*Ubuntu*: ‘You are because I am’ or ‘I am because you are’?” *Alternation* 20, 1 (2013), 229-247, 231.

²³ Y. Waghid and P. Smeyers, “Reconsidering *Ubuntu*: On the Educational Potential of a Particular Ethic of Care,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 44, 2 (2011), 6-20.

²⁴ Maxine Ankrah, “The Impact of HIV/AIDS on the Family and Other Significant Relationships: The African Clan Revisited,” *AIDS Care* 5, 1 (1993), 5-22; Keith Hart, “Kinship, Contract, and Trust: The Economic Organization of Migrants in An African City Slum,” *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations*, ed. D. Gambetta, Oxford: University of Oxford, 2000, 176-193; Michael Grimm, Gubert Flore, Koriko Ousman, Jann Lay, and Christophe J. Nordman, “Kinship Ties and Entrepreneurship in Western Africa,” *Journal of Small Business and Entrepreneurship* 26, 2 (2013), 125-150.

and Smeyers’ earlier mentioned assertion that the notion of *ubuntu* is fundamental to African socio-ethical thought, and illuminates the ‘communal rootedness and interdependence of individuals, and underpinning the importance of human relationships’.

5. Conclusion: Dialogue and Horizons

Thomas Lewis gives voice to my own concern when he asserts that in comparative inquiry we are “confronted by a basic methodological issue – the challenge of dialogue or communication between interlocutors situated within different religious and/or philosophical traditions.”²⁵ He goes on to draw the distinction between a ‘real’ dialogue as in that between the adherents of different traditions, and an *imaginary* dialogue, between texts, traditions, or thinkers who are brought together by the one doing the comparison. He points out that *both* kinds of dialogue oblige us to ask whether a significant exchange on complex views in religious thought and ethics is actually possible and plausible between individuals or texts embedded in radically different intellectual and historical milieus.²⁶

According to the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer there was a “historically effected consciousness” that people held to and that it was “embedded in their specific view of history and culture.” Gadamer labelled this range of meaning set by historical and socio-cultural specificities as “horizon,” and stated that all ‘understanding’ involves a “fusion of horizons.” For Gadamer, comprehension is a communicative event, and has as its basic characteristic, the hermeneutical conversation.²⁷ My own hermeneutical horizon has been cultivated on a personal level (through my rich Hindu upbringing) as well as on an intellectual level (fashioned by the early studies in South Asian Religions and Indology). However, it is a horizon that is already, to borrow from Gadamer, ‘fused’ in a (personal) sense. Being born as 5th generation Indian in South Africa has exposed me to a multicultural world where African Traditional Religions holds meaning for a large number of the local African communities.

²⁵ Thomas A. Lewis, “Frames of Comparison: Anthropology and Inheriting Traditional Practices,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 33, 2 (2005), 225-253, 226.

²⁶ Lewis, “Frames of Comparison,” 226.

²⁷ Dilys Karen Rees, “Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics: The Vantage Points and the Horizons in the Readers’ Responses to an American Literature Text,” *The Reading Matrix* 3, 1 (2003), 1-16, 1.

I believe that a dialogue, or at the very least, a conversation between or amongst different traditions is possible, although it needs to be cautiously approached so as to afford full deference to the particularities of each tradition. Such a (comparative) conversation is important for the insights it may uncover that would otherwise lie embedded within the specificities of individual religio-philosophic traditions. For those adopting such a view, and I situate myself here, the dialogue and comparison is situated within a universalist concern and question about ‘the human condition.’ “*Comparison*,” as Lewis suggests, can begin with a “universal human phenomenon or problem.”²⁸ Those universal human problems – of deprivation and livelihood, of control and domination, as both micro insidious expressions amongst individuals as well as macro structural policy level ruptures between nation states – point to what most people within religion see as emanating from a sense of profound disconnect. Religions in turn, seek to heal that disconnect and teach what they see as an inherent interconnection and interdependence. In religio-philosophic traditions such as ATR and Advaita, this becomes exemplified in their non-dual philosophic perspective.

It is sometimes perhaps simplistically pronounced that spiritual realisation lies completely outside any ethical consideration in Advaita. Advaita does speak of a radical ontological distinction between absolute consciousness (Brahman) and modified consciousness (Atman). To claim however, that this translates to a disinterest in ethics and *dharma* within Advaita is fallacious. For the Advaita of Sankara, this relative phenomenal world is ‘real’ from the side of the aspirant seeking *moksha* or liberation. Arvind Sharma articulates that this division is fundamental to conventional epistemologies, in as much as it is in concert with everyday routinized common sense. For Sharma, epistemologies are based on a paradigmatic partition between the subject and the object. According to such an epistemology, the subject or the individual as a psychosomatic identity is to be clearly differentiated from what he or she perceives, namely, the object.²⁹ Sharma also draws attention to the point that, even though Advaita is generally considered an idealistic school of philosophy ontologically, its epistemology is realistic. “Advaita Vedanta claims some

²⁸ Lewis, “Frames of Comparison,” 227.

²⁹ A. Sharma, “Who Speaks for Hinduism?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, 4 (2000), 751-760, 757.

kind of reality even for objects of illusion” and “to be perceived is *to be*.”³⁰ While Advaita, as expounded by Sankara and his contemporaries, may appear formal and somewhat opaque, later neo Advaitins, Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Anandamayi, et al, ‘spoke’ Advaita through a diction that is more easily understandable by their Hindu followers. Their teachings, couched through folk sayings and parables, attempt to show that all sentient beings are interrelated and are part of the same ultimate reality. They taught that it is thus the personal responsibility of individuals to honour this relationship (which is clouded by ignorance or *avidya*).

When ignorance is present, says Latha Poonamallee, Brahman is veiled by an illusory appearance. She reminds us of Sankara’s use of Nagarjuna’s famous analogy of the coiled rope (Brahman) in the dark that is cloaked (*avarana*) by the illusion of a snake (the phenomenal world). The illusion of the snake is projected (*vikshepa*) or superimposed by the perceiver onto the reality of the rope. But in the clear light of *vidya* or true knowledge, the error is sublated and the truth becomes permanently clear,³¹ where Brahman alone is Real. Phenomenal empirical reality then, is not merely illusion; from the view of relative truth, it is objectively real. *Maya* is said to represent the conditional reality of physical and mental appearance, its inherent impermanence and selflessness.³² For the advaitins, the objective world exists and is not an empty illusion.³³ Its reality, however, is not in the same ontological level as Brahman. Thus, it is only when *moksha* has been attained that there is the realization that none of that *is* or *was* ever, (ultimately) real. It is at this juncture, as Harold Coward points out, that the world with its cluster of ethical concerns is, ‘left behind’ and when they (and all ethical enactments within that world) cease to exist.³⁴

The distinction with African Tradition Religions, however, is that at no point are ethical enactments left, or intended to be left behind; indeed they are meant to continue into the afterlife and within the memory and

³⁰ Sharma, “Who Speaks for Hinduism?” 756

³¹ David Paul Boaz, *Appearance and Reality: Advaita Vedanta Ontology*, http://davidpaulboaz.org/_documents/stromata/appearance_and_reality.pdf, 1-2.

³² Latha Poonamallee, “Advaita (Non-Dualism) as Metatheory: A Constellation of Ontology, Epistemology, and Praxis,” *Integral Review* 6, 3 (2010), 190-200,194.

³³ Poonamallee, “Advaita (Non-Dualism) as Metatheory,” 191-200.

³⁴ Harold Coward, “Hindu Spirituality and the Environment,” *Eco-theology* 3 (1997), 50-60.

periodic ritual remembering and memorialisation of the dead. The deceased remain in kinship relationships with the living and are to be treated in a manner deemed ethically appropriate by the tradition. The ancestors, in turn are believed as being tasked to ‘take care of’ and ‘watch over’ the surviving kin folk in an ongoing reciprocal relationship. The statement that ‘belief in the ancestors’ is one universal brick in the conceptual architectural matrix of African Traditional Religions thus completes the full circuit, having been mentioned in the opening section. We are able to see how it is conceptually braided to the other architectural brick which is the notion of *ubuntu*. It is this *ubuntu*, or ethical behaviour that is meant to shape ones actions to *both* the living, as well as those that have passed on (and become ancestors). This particular understanding is also vital to how the adherents of African Traditional Religions see themselves and shape their sense of an African identity.

The South African theologian and scholar Dion Foster states, quite rightly, that “African theology has a great deal to contribute to the theological discourse on human identity.”³⁵ As Foster himself points out, “relationships are central to the formation, expression and understanding of who an individual person is.”³⁶ One concurs with Foster’s thesis that the African philosophical concept of *ubuntu* affirms the understanding that identity arises out of dynamic inter-subjective interactions between individuals. African ethics thus “gives primacy to *relationality*, even to those in the metaphysical realm. I have referred to this elsewhere as a kind of ‘transcendental genealogy.’³⁷

Simply put, the African philosophical and religious conviction is that one cannot be a human being without being related to other people (both alive as well as the ancestors). Likewise the individual’s relatedness to the community finds its expression in the African concept of *ubuntu*, which as mentioned earlier, literally means humanness. What it (*truly*) means to be human is something that the individual derives from the community and there is no disjuncture or dichotomy between the individual and the community, because the individual and the community exist (or ideally ought to exist) in a symbiotic relationship. According to the scholars Waghid and Smeyers, the individual is a social being whose ‘identity’

³⁵ Dion A. Foster, “An African Theological Contribution towards an Integrated Relational Ontological Identity,” *Theology* 113, 874 (2010), 243-253, 245.

³⁶ Foster, “An African Theological Contribution,” 243.

³⁷ Naidu, “Transcendent Genealogy and Kinship Relations.”

bears the marks of relatedness and interdependence.³⁸ All of this allows for ethical enactments and the “capacity of social self-sacrifice on behalf of others.”³⁹ Such a conceptualization of a mutual self has also a vital social imperative, positioned toward interconnected action and outcomes. It is beautifully summed up in the popular African aphorism which speaks to a profound and ultimate sense of relationality: *I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.*⁴⁰ Within the philosophical tradition of African Traditional Religions, the guiding question is how particular decisions concerning other individuals affect one’s relations in the community of existence.

Both ATR and Advaita are traditions with philosophies that are concerned with understanding human existence as an integral part of a larger and interconnected whole. Thus, both traditions are deeply concerned with “socio-ecological relational approach to reality.” Mandova and Chingombe claim that *unhu/ubuntu* is vital in creating the necessary general framework within which people can pursue their life’s “existential projects necessary for development.”⁴¹ *Development*, in the context of many countries in the global south, such as South Africa, is a critical issue that speaks directly to survival and livelihoods.

This brings me back to my opening statement pointing out that, for me, it is the religious worldview that intimately informs and sculpts the shape and articulation of ethical principles; being forged as they are in the belief structures of that particular religio-philosophic tradition. Both Advaita Hinduism and African Traditional Religions are in turn philosophies of non-dualisms. Ethical enactments within each of these traditions derive their meaning from this fundamental non-dual philosophical perspective. However, while Advaita Hinduism places a greater emphasis on the ontological realm as holding ultimate meaning, in African Traditional Religions, it is seemingly the phenomenal realm that is emphasised. For this is the ‘vital space’ that provides, both the grounds (in a literal sense) as well as the rationale for ethical action. In ATR *hu-/ubu*

³⁸Waghid and Smeyers, “Reconsidering *Ubuntu*,” 18.

³⁹Idoniboye-Obu and Whetho, “*Ubuntu*,” 232.

⁴⁰John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1969, 108-109.

⁴¹Mandova Evans and Agrippa Chingombe, “The Shona Proverb as an Expression of *Unhu/Ubuntu*,” *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development* 2, 1 (2013), 1-16.

signifies ‘general being’ and *mu-/umu* designates a specific instantiation of being. However, *both* appear to operate on the same ontological (and ethical levels).

Thus, while on some levels the fundamental non-dualistic ontological basis in African Traditional Religions shares some architectural similarity to Advaita Hinduism; one reiterates, however, that it is differently conceptualised in Advaita. As pointed out by a reader of a draft of the paper, it could be perhaps argued that the ATR perspective is somewhat ‘superior’ as there is seemingly no distinction of the phenomenal and the metaphysical as impermeable separate realities. The phenomenal is in a sense, afforded ‘ontological status’ and ethics and ethical acts are viewed as important, and not only applicable in the phenomenal realm. It is however, not about one tradition being better or superior to another. It bears noting though that that in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, the notion of relationality and *ubuntu* are often powerfully deployed by the extended African rural communities within the context of offering help and assistance to HIV/AIDS orphans and families that are disposed from their land and homes. In this context, being interconnected in the phenomenal realm is powerfully acknowledged.

Ontological assumptions undergird epistemological positions. It is not that ethics is unimportant in Advaita, as the earlier discussion has shown. However, it (ethics) is, in the final analysis, sublimated in the knowledge that Brahman alone is Real. It is this singular fundamental truth that the Advaitin strives to ‘realize’ that *Atman* is *Brahman*. For the follower of ATR, the fundamental truth is that he/she is human because of other people. Mutuality and relationality of *ubu* and *ntu*, which are ‘ontological realities’, operate in the phenomenal realm. Thus, while relationality (which presupposes more than one) falls away in the Advaitin’s realisation of non-duality and Brahman, in ATR, reciprocity and relationality remain as hallmarks of interconnectedness and interdependence (and of humanity).