

Philosophical racism and ubuntu: In dialogue with Mogobe Ramose

C. W. Maris

Faculty of Law, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Faculty of Law, University of the Western Cape, Bellville

c.w.maris@uva.nl

This article discusses two complementary themes that play an important role in contemporary South African political philosophy: (1) the racist tradition in Western philosophy; and (2) the role of ubuntu in regaining an authentic African identity, which was systematically suppressed during the colonial past and apartheid. These are also leading themes in Mogobe Ramose's *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*. The first part concentrates on John Locke. It discusses the thesis that the reprehensible racism of many founders of liberal political philosophy has lethally infected liberal theory. This view neglects the distinction between genesis and justification. Political liberalism has since cleansed itself of the prejudices of its spiritual ancestors. Liberal human rights exclude racism as a matter of principle. The second part discusses the claim that the ubuntu philosophy provides a better basis for a constitution in a modern society than political liberalism. A major problem is that ubuntu is an essentially contested concept. Some philosophers consider ubuntu to be a moribund notion (Matolino); others see it as a vital concept par excellence. In the latter case, it is elaborated from sundry incompatible political views, ranging from African nationalism (Ramose) via humanist communitarianism (Metz) to liberalism (Mboti). Conclusion: as an essentially contested ideological concept, ubuntu should not be a decisive constitutional standard for the application of state force. In contrast, the constitutional model of political liberalism provides a reasonable alternative, as it is designed precisely to solve the problem of social plurality and ideological contest.

African philosophy and Western racism

“Aristotle, Locke, Kant, Hume and Hegel... are among the great Western philosophers who made no small contribution to the philosophical racism in the West” writes the South African philosopher Mogobe Ramose in *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu* (Ramose 1999, 15). As a counterbalance to Western philosophical racism, Ramose formulates an authentic African philosophy based on *ubuntu*, the Bantu concept of humaneness.¹

In Ramose's African philosophy, ubuntu plays a pivotal role: it demonstrates African rationality, and thus confirms an authentic African identity that was systematically suppressed during the colonial past and apartheid. Ramose's philosophical agenda consists of two complementary elements: demolition of the Western hegemony and reconstruction of the African worldview and way of life. The latter does not imply a return to pre-colonial African society: the traditions serve as a source for the construction of an authentic model that is suitable for today's Africa – and can also be attractive to the rest of the world.

Inspired by Ramose's call for a dialogue between the “radically opposed epistemological paradigms” of the African and Western worlds” (1999, 134), this article discusses both aspects of

¹ Ubuntu plays an important role in post-apartheid South Africa. The term was used in the interim Constitution (1993) in order to anchor the policy of reconciliation in pre-colonial African traditions, and has since gained a prominent place in jurisprudence.

Ramose’s philosophical programme: Western philosophical racism and African ubuntu philosophy.² First, I discuss the thesis that the racism of many founders of liberal political philosophy has lethally infected liberal theory as such. I object that this view neglects the distinction between *genesis* and *justification*, and that political liberalism has in the meantime cleansed itself of the prejudices of its spiritual ancestors.³ I then situate Ramose’s philosophy in the broad African ubuntu debate. I conclude by comparing the political elaboration of the ubuntu philosophy with political liberalism: which of these views is the best basis for a constitution in a modern society? As all conclusions are provisional, the result invites further dialogue.

Philosophical racism

According to Ramose, Western philosophy is permeated with racism. Aristotle formulated an essentialist definition of “man” as a *rational* animal; at the same time, he considered non-Greek “barbarians” to be irrational, and therefore naturally destined for slavery. This ancient doctrine was recycled in the early modern period to justify colonial slavery.

The philosophers of the Enlightenment built on this. They argued that all human beings, as rational persons, have a natural right to individual freedom. That is why all people must free themselves from physical and mental slavery; their rationality enables them to rise above religious superstition, irrational forms of government and oppressive power relations, in order to emancipate themselves as equal citizens. However, argues Ramose, the Enlightenment philosophers only had Western Europeans like themselves in mind. Being *featherless bipeds*, the indigenous Africans, Australians and Americans may have looked like people at first glance; but due to their alleged lack of rational capacities they were branded as sub-human. This served as a justification for colonialism and slavery: “On this basis, slavery, plunder, conquest in unjust wars as well as enforced ‘civilisation’ and ‘Christianisation’ became the rights of every human being outside and beyond the geographical boundaries of the West” (Ramose 2005, 17).

According to Ramose, Western philosophy played a decisive role in colonial oppression,

the philosophical character of the European colonization of Africa and other parts of the world was the urge to impose the European epistemological paradigm upon Africa and other colonized peoples of the world. This means that European colonization was intent upon establishing and maintaining in all the colonized parts of the world, the European conception of reality, knowledge and truth (Ramose 1999, 45).

The colonised had no right to think, speak and act independently. At best, they could imitate the Western way of life of the “conqueror”. Even after the abolition of slavery and after decolonisation, philosophical racism continued to have a dehumanising effect: “the posterity of the colonized continue to live under the burden of the conviction that the notion of ‘man being a rational animal’ did not mean the African” (Ramose 2001, 12). Hence the prejudice that Africa is incapable of producing knowledge, so that African philosophy seems inconceivable – Ramose calls this *epistemicide*. And hence the need for a “struggle for reason” in order to decolonise black consciousness: the path from mimesis to authenticity is hard as long as the oppressive Western “epistemological paradigm” reigns.

Ramose criticises the racism of Locke, Hume, Kant and Hegel.⁴ According to Kant, the motto of the Enlightenment is *Dare to think for yourself!* However, in writings such as *Of the Different Races of Human Beings* (1777) and *On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy* (1788), he assumed a hierarchy of four races, the colour of which coincides with a diminishing degree

2 On 19 January 2018, I attended the inspiring presentation of the Dutch translation of Ramose’s book at the Amsterdam Public Library. I then wrote an earlier version of this article with the aim of introducing readers in the Netherlands to the broad ubuntu debate in Africa. It was presented as a paper at two symposia on *Ubuntu in South Africa today* with Mogobe Ramose at UWC (14 March 2019) and UNISA (27 March 2019). The concluding sections of the present article derive from the lively dialogue I had there with Ramose and others.

3 This section builds on Maris (2018a), chapters 2 and 8, as well as Maris (2018b).

4 Ramose discusses Hegel in detail. His criticism of the others is based on secondary sources, in the case of Locke on Bracken (1978).

of rationality: white, yellow, black, red. The whites were the only race to possess all the talents. Amerindians and especially blacks were ideally suited to slavery.⁵

Kant built on Hume's earlier assertion that Negroes lack talent. In a notorious note in *Of National Characters* (1748), Hume distinguished four human species; and Negroes are by nature inferior to whites. "There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences" (Hume 1974, 213). Admittedly, in Jamaica a learned Negro was spotted, but probably he only mastered some trick like a parrot that imitates a few words.⁶

As far as Locke is concerned, Ramose agrees with Bracken's criticism (1978) that "Locke... is a pivotal figure in the development of modern racism in that he provides a model which permits us to count skin color as nominally essential property of men" (Ramose 1999, 16; quotes Bracken 1978, 243–244).

I concentrate on John Locke (1632–1704) regarding philosophical racism. First of all because I presented Locke as a main character in *We want our freedom!*, my play on slavery that was performed in Amsterdam (2013), Curaçao (2014) and Aruba (2015). Moreover, Locke composed his famous *A Letter Concerning Toleration* while he was in hiding in 1685 as a political refugee on the Keizersgracht in Amsterdam, just around the corner from my canal house on the Leliegracht. So, I follow his footsteps every day.

Unlike Hume and Kant, Locke never made explicit racist statements in his philosophical writings. However, despite his plea for liberal freedom rights, he considered slavery to be legitimate in exceptional circumstances. In addition, he was involved as a board member in various colonial institutions, and held shares in the Royal African Company, which had the monopoly of the English slave trade.⁷ Locke could have known better, because he was familiar with the misery of slave life. Moreover, a number of contemporaries pointed out the injustice of slavery (albeit a small minority). For example, Francis van den Enden, Spinoza's Latin teacher, stated in his *Free Political Propositions* ([1665] 1992) that slavery does not belong in a free country, and that all peoples of the world are capable of self-government. But all this still does not prove that Locke was a racist. Indeed, scholars passionately disagree on this point.

Locke and slavery

Locke's attitude towards colonial slavery was highly questionable, to say the least. On the one hand, he considered freedom to be a natural right to which all people are entitled. According to Locke, man is distinguished by his capacity to think independently (Locke 1979). Therefore no one is subordinate to anybody else; everybody should be free to design his life autonomously, as he sees fit (Locke 1988). The limit of one's individual freedom is that one may not harm another person in his life, health, freedom and possessions (Locke 1988). According to the social contract, the state must guarantee each individual's rights to these goods.

This seems to exclude slavery. And indeed, Locke begins his *Two Treatises of Government* with the famous phrase:

SLAVERY is so vile and miserable an Estate of Man... that it is hardly to be conceived, that an *Englishman*, much less a *Gentleman*, should plead for't (1988, 141; emphasis in original)

But in *Of slavery*, in chapter 4 of his *Second Treatise*, Locke argues that slavery can be legitimate in exceptional circumstances. Principally, he considers freedom to be an *inalienable* right that

5 See also Eze (1997). Kleingeld (2007) argues, however, that in the last decade of the 18th century Kant improved his philosophical position in favour of a universalist view of human rationality and morality. Now, he considered slavery to be illegal. See also Flikschuh and Ypi (2014).

6 For an interpretation of the changes to this footnote that Hume made in the course of his life, see Garrett (2000). In a note below about Locke, we meet a rational parrot that has an elegant conversation with its Dutch interlocutors.

7 This ambiguity makes Locke an interesting stage character. In *We want our freedom!* he plays a leading role in a dramatic trial concerning the slave Virginia, who is tried for escape attempts in 1744. Her owner Vanderdendur, represented by his lawyer Jacobus Capitein (about whom more later), claims her as his legitimate property. Virginia, on the other hand, is demanding not only her personal freedom, but also the total abolition of slavery. Locke acts as her counsel – but, on closer inspection, is he not a pettifogger?

cannot be completely waived precisely because it is characteristic of being human. Yet, following the example of Grotius and Roman law, Locke makes one exception: those who start a war of aggression and end up as captives may be made into slaves. After all, the aggressor has forfeited his claim to his natural rights by consciously opting for the state of war. His victor may therefore take his life; logically he may also let him live and use him as a slave (Locke 1988).

Locke did not address *colonial* slavery in his philosophical writings, either in an approving or in a disapproving sense. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not make any racist statements. But he held shares in the English slave trade. Moreover, in his capacity as secretary, he co-authored the Constitution of the American colony, Carolina. Article 101 reads: *Every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves*.⁸

Against this background, it is not surprising that critics read the philosophical treatises that Locke wrote on his own authority as an implicit vindication of the racist colonial slave system. According to them, Locke's justification of slavery was aimed at African-American slaves, while he reserved the liberties for Europeans.

According to this view, Locke would have meant "SLAVERY" in the abovementioned opening sentence of his *Treatises* in a purely metaphorical sense, as part of his criticism of the absolute monarchies in Europe. In such tyrannical states, the subjects are like slaves, since the monarch has deprived them of their natural right to freedom. Chapter 4 of the *Second Treatise* is said to refer to colonial slavery: Africans who are made captives in wars between Africans fulfil the conditions of legitimate slavery. The European slave traders are allowed to purchase them in order to sell them in the American colonies.

Other authors reject this interpretation. They point out that Locke restricted the criteria for legitimate slavery to such an extent that they did not cover *colonial* slavery. After all, most of the enslaved Africans were victims of ordinary raids. Furthermore, Locke explicitly stated that the innocent children of slaves are entitled to their natural rights to life and freedom – surely, they did not wage war. This excludes inherited slavery as in the colonies.

Moreover, Locke's legitimate slavery is not tailored to Africans, but concerns all unjust warriors, including Europeans. Yet Locke is also under suspicion on this point. Bernasconi and Mann (2005) point out that this broad interpretation, taken literally, would have the consequence that slavery would have to be reintroduced into Europe. This seems so contrary to Locke's view of a civilised constitutional state that, according to these critics, he must have tacitly assumed that (European) Christians cannot enslave each other. Consequently, his theory of slavery must have been intended exclusively for Negro slaves, to the exclusion of Europeans. Bernasconi and Mann assume an unspoken racism on the part of Locke, which would have made this dichotomy so self-evident to him that he did not feel the need to explicate it in so many words.

According to critics such as Davis (1966), Locke deliberately created an exceptional position for a category of individuals who lack natural rights because they have violated the rights of others: they fall outside the common Law of Reason and are therefore not protected by the social contract. According to Glausser (1990), this would also apply to the underdeveloped Africans and Amerindians who do not know how to make efficient use of their land and thus have no right of ownership over it. That is why Africa and America belong to the European settlers who are able to develop the country. If the indigenous people violently oppose colonial civilisation, they can legitimately be made into slaves.⁹

Ramose bases his indictment of Locke's philosophical racism on Bracken's more abstract epistemological argumentation. Bracken (1973; 1978) focuses on the nominalism of Locke's empiricist theory of knowledge. Empiricism denies the existence of essences in reality, so that

8 Furthermore, in 1672 Locke invested in the company Adventurers to Bahamas, which operated slave plantations in the Bahamas. From 1696 to 1701, he was a board member of the English Board of Trade and Plantations.

9 Armitage (2004) quotes *Second Treatise*, §34: "God gave the World to Men in Common; but...it cannot be supposed he meant it should always remain common and uncultivated. He gave it to the Industrious and Rational" (Locke 1988, 191). In §45 Locke continues: "yet there are still Great Tracts of Ground to be found, which (the Inhabitants thereof not having joyned with the rest of Mankind, in the consent of the Use of their common Money) lie waste, and are more than the People, who dwell on it, do, or can make use of, and so still lie in common" (ibid., 299).

general concepts are merely names. Therefore, the empiricist can compose generic concepts at will. He can define “man” (or “gold” or “parrot”) according to his own preferences by composing the concept with properties of his choice, for example “whiteness”. Bracken refers to Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* IV, vii, 16: a child who has only seen white Britons, argues Locke there, will attribute the quality of “white” to the idea of “man”. It can then logically demonstrate that a black person is by definition *not* a human being. Bracken acknowledges that an adult can reject the child’s understanding as naive. Nonetheless, he argues, in view of his nominalism Locke cannot disprove *in principle* that whiteness is a typical human characteristic (so that blacks are not part of humanity). “Indeed, there is no mechanism within the Lockean model to rule out counting skin color as the ‘essential’ property of men” (Bracken 1973, 244). In this way, concludes Bracken, Locke’s philosophy facilitated the rise of racism.

Waldron (2002a) interprets Locke’s passages about slavery more sympathetically than these radical critics, but also concludes that Locke had his fingers burnt. He adds that slavery runs counter to the ideal of equal freedom that characterises the spirit of Locke’s work as a whole.

Considering all of this, I agree with the conclusion of Glausser (1990) that Locke’s attitude to slavery can be interpreted in three ways, all of which are defensible. According to the first view, expressed by Waldron and others, Locke’s chapter on slavery is an unfortunate deviation from his liberal political philosophy as a whole. A second view identifies a similar contradiction in Locke’s work, but sees this as a despicable attempt to justify his own interests in slavery. According to a third view, advocated by Marxists, Bracken (1973), Davis (1966) and Glausser himself, Locke’s passages on slavery are characteristic of his political philosophy in general.

All these interpretations are critical. Whichever reading is the correct one, Farr rightly notes that “Locke’s silence about the Afro-American slave practices that he helped forward remains unsettling and poses some of the greatest problems for understanding Locke as a theorist and a political actor” (Farr 1986, 264).

Genesis and justification

What, then, about Ramose’s indictment of Locke as a philosophical racist, and the implicit assertion that liberal political philosophy is inherently racist? I share Ramose’s view that Locke’s position on slavery cannot be excused. But he is hasty in his definite choice of the radical view that Locke was a racist who wanted to justify colonial slavery. The same applies to the associated thesis that Locke’s errors affect liberal political philosophy as such.

Was Locke a racist? Bracken, on whose authority Ramose bases his verdict, does not make it sufficiently plausible that the third interpretation of Locke’s attitude to slavery is better than the other two. Bracken concedes that he only demonstrates that Locke’s theory of knowledge may *facilitate* racism, not that it *is* inherently racist (Bracken 1978).

In itself, the conceptual openness of nominalism is neutral – Bracken only warns that it lends itself to manipulation by those in power.¹⁰ As we have seen, Aristotle’s competing epistemology and metaphysics, rationalism, can just as easily facilitate a racist view of man. Contrary to Locke, Aristotle assumed that there are essences in reality, that we can trace them through reason, and that a definition of a thing should describe its real essence. He defined man as an essentially rational being, therefore, irrational people, notably women and barbarians, are imperfectly human.

¹⁰ Is, then, Locke’s own liberal plea for natural human freedoms not based on conceptual arbitrariness? Not necessarily, argues Waldron (2002a). Waldron acknowledges that according to Locke’s theory of knowledge, “species” is only a conventional construction, so that “man” has no reference in the floating world (Locke 1979). But in empirical reality, people show sufficient similarities to attribute “corporeal rationality” to them, as Locke does (Locke 1979). Thus, human beings distinguish themselves from other animals by their rational capacities, and therefore have an equal right to freedom. Consequently, women and Africans are entitled to equal liberties as soon as it appears that their alleged irrationality is contrary to the observable facts. (But parrots are not. In his *Essay* II, xxvii, Locke mentions the story by Johan Maurits van Nassau, governor of Brazil, about a parrot that had an extensive conversation with him. Seeing the governor and his Dutch retinue, the parrot said, “What a company of white Men are here?” Suppose this story is true, says Locke, then the rationality of this parrot would not make the animal “human” yet. After all, being human is defined by a *combination* of characteristics. The corporeal rationality that the parrot shows is not “human” because his mind resides in a bird body. Indeed, a parrot is a feathered and winged biped. More about Locke’s rational parrot in Walmsley 1995).

Bracken also recognises that his criticism does not show that Locke himself was a racist. He can only point at circumstantial evidence: Locke's role as a board member of colonial institutions does point in that direction. However, in Locke's defence it can be argued that his administrative work does not necessarily reflect an underlying racist ideology. His co-authorship of the Carolina Constitution may be excused as hackwork. After all, Locke never made any explicit racist statements in the philosophical works he wrote on his own authority.

It requires relatively artificial constructions to uncover the concealed racist intentions that critics suspect in Locke's writings. If Locke thought non-Europeans were inferior, why did he not just say that out loud, just like Hume and Kant? If he had wanted to defend colonial slavery, why did he not do so in so many words? Perhaps because, as a civilised Englishman, he did not want to speak out openly in favour of it? Did he realise that slavery is, after all, incompatible with his fundamental ideal of freedom?

Is liberal political theory racist? According to critics such as Veraart (2017), the racism of Locke and other Enlightenment philosophers exemplifies that liberal philosophy as such is inherently racist:

I find it problematic that we are not talking more about the way in which this liberal theory has contributed to the structural inequality in the world that we still face today. We still think that our values are superior, that the world will be a better place if everyone adopts our Western ideas, but forgetting that the same theories led to enormous inequality (interview in Breedveld 2017, 12).

Early modern thinkers such as Locke “continued to divide the world into civilised people and barbarians, into cultural and natural peoples, into rational persons and brutes, into freemen and slaves” (Veraart 2017, 216). Veraart endorses the diagnosis of the social contract of Charles Mills (1997): in fact, it is a *racial contract*. After all, the theories of the social contract have “almost always worked to the advantage of the white man and to the detriment of the black man...” (Veraart 2017, 230). The reference by liberal philosophers to freedom and equality is therefore pure rhetoric, says Veraart.

This conclusion is also a hasty one. It is undisputed that Locke's errors are part of the colonial past, a dark side of Western history that still makes itself felt. But his mistakes do not in themselves affect liberal political philosophy – even if Locke was a racist in disguise. On the contrary, liberal human rights excludes slavery as a matter of principle; the underlying principles of freedom and equality cannot therefore be dismissed as mere rhetoric.

The thesis that Locke's theoretical errors undermine liberal theory as such disregards the epistemological distinction between *genesis* and *justification*. Historical peculiarities in the genesis of a theory are irrelevant in the context of justification, which only concerns the strongest possible version of that theory. In other words, the discussion about the validity of liberal political philosophy follows its own argumentative logic, which leaves behind the personal mistakes of the theorists. The fact that Locke's friend Newton combined his discovery of the laws of gravity with eccentric religious views and alchemy does not diminish the status of modern natural science.

Locke's philosophy contains countless incongruities arising from prejudices prevailing at the time and from his position in society. His untenable defence of slavery is only one of them. Locke stated, for example, that morality loses all its authority without faith in God, and that religious freedom therefore does not apply to atheists. Furthermore, in Locke's version of the social contract, the citizens do have individual freedom rights, but no social and political rights. His arguments in favour of this are nowadays considered untenable. This does not mean that the liberal principles of freedom and equality are merely rhetorical; on the contrary, correcting such inconsistencies has extended their scope.

This is evident from John Rawls's contemporary version of the liberal social contract (1971): in a just state, all citizens are entitled to freedom rights, political participation rights and social rights. This implies complete tolerance and freedom of belief – after all, history has falsified Locke's assumption that atheists threaten public order. Rawls comments on Locke and his contemporary Bayle: “More experience would presumably have convinced them that they were mistaken”

(Rawls 1999, 92). Slavery is not acceptable either: “Where the conception of justice as fairness applies, slavery is *always* unjust” (Rawls 1999, 67; emphasis in original). Indeed, slavery “violates principles that would be agreed to in the original position by the representatives of persons as free and equal” (Rawls 1996, 124).¹¹ The liberal Universal Declaration of Human Rights also excludes slavery in Article 4: *No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.*

It would be different if the discriminatory exclusion mechanisms that Ramose suspects in Locke’s theory were a necessary part of liberal political philosophy as such. But this is not the case. On the contrary, history has shown a development in which more and more members of groups that have traditionally been victims of social exclusion are recognised as equal subjects of law. This is partly because ideas have a relative autonomy in a conceptual “third world” (as Popper 1972 calls it). Once an idea such as *human equality* has been generally accepted, it acquires its own logical gravity: the burden of proof now rests on the party that wants to exclude certain categories of people.

This moral progress is promoted by learning from our experience. For a long time, women were excluded from study and public positions because they were supposed to lack the required intelligence. But as soon as they got the chance, they proved the opposite. Following this large-scale social experiment, no one can reasonably maintain that women are not eligible for study grants or the right to vote.

The same applies to the prejudice against Africans. This was already refuted by Jacobus Capitein – who was the model for Locke’s antagonist Capitein in my play *We want our freedom!*. The real Capitein was born in West Africa in 1717 with the name Asar. At the age of seven, Asar was enslaved by other Africans, who sold him to the Dutch merchant Van Goch. Van Goch renamed him Capitein and took the boy to the Netherlands, knowing that slaves would be released as soon as they landed there. In 1741, Capitein, as a free man, completed his theological studies at Leiden University with the dissertation *Political-theological thesis to examine the question: Is slavery compatible with Christian freedom, or not?*¹² This was an exceptional performance: a former slave, raised in an illiterate environment, completed a dissertation in Latin at the age of 24.¹³

As soon as such prejudices are exposed, the basic liberal ideal of freedom and equality implies that the excluded group becomes a full participant in the social contract. Slavery still occurs, but, due to progressive insights, there is today hardly anyone who maintains that it is just in principle.¹⁴

Preliminary conclusion: Locke was wrong, but liberalism is not. Does this imply that “our values are superior, that the world will be a better place if everyone adopts our Western ideas” – an arrogant position that Veraart rightly rejects? No, it is impossible to call Western culture as a whole superior. After all, it is guilty of large-scale violence and oppression, as evidenced by colonialism, slavery, two World Wars and the atomic bomb. Nor can one call “our Western ideas” superior, for these also include Christian intolerance, fascism and communism. One can, however, defend the more modest

11 Yet Rawls’s early writings echo Locke’s arguments for slavery in the case of prisoners of war, albeit in a light form that expressly excludes racist colonial slavery. Imagine city states, inhabited by free and equal citizens, used to killing each other’s prisoners of war. All citizens agree with a treaty stating that captives will henceforth be detained as slaves – even if they themselves would be taken prisoner of war. Such an institution of “contractual servitude”, being more humane than the previous situation, can be considered just, as long as slavery is not hereditary. Rawls hastens to add: “Of course, the historical forms of slavery have not satisfied these conditions” (Rawls 1963, 83). This argument returns in *A Theory of Justice* ([1971] 1973), but has been further restricted there to transitional stages to a completely liberal regime, on condition that slaves “are treated not too severely” (Rawls [1971] 1973, 284). It has disappeared in *Political Liberalism* (1993).

12 Capitein answered this question with a resounding *yes* – which is why he acts in *We want our freedom!* as a lawyer for the slave trader Vandendendur. After all, the Old and New Testaments endorse slavery in many passages. Thus, in his *Letter to the Ephesians* 6: 5–8, Paul preaches: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ” (Capitein 2001, 132). Ramose will comment that Capitein’s way of thinking was completely westernised. Indeed, as an African ex-slave advocating slavery, Capitein’s character was at least as ambiguous as Locke’s, and was therefore another ideal model for a theatre personality. Disdainfully, Virginia calls him a *cocunut*: black outside, white inside. Also see Kpobi 1993.

13 Similarly, Ramose’s career refutes the statement of the Belgian missionary Placide Temples, founder of African ethnophilosophy, that only a Westerner could have written his *Bantu Philosophy* ([1945] 1959). “We do not claim, of course, that the Bantu are capable of formulating a philosophical treatise, complete with an adequate vocabulary. It is our job to proceed to such systematic development” (Tempels 1959, 36).

14 Except in extreme fundamentalist circles, such as the Islamic State.

thesis that liberal political philosophy is preferable to its competitors: a democratic constitutional state with its human rights is doing better than an absolute monarchy, a fascist dictatorship or a theocracy.

However, this thesis is controversial as well. Ramose, for example, considers the political morality of his ubuntu philosophy to be far superior. In his view, it provides an excellent basis for an alternative “indigenous philosophy of human rights”, based on respectful human relations (Ramose 2017, 332). The ubuntu ideal also claims universal potential: even though it is based on ancient African traditions, it can “be attractive to the West and other parts of the world” (Haenen, in Ramose 2017, 20). But this claim encounters its own problems: Ubuntu is an essentially contested concept in African political philosophy. Further dialogue is therefore necessary: what does ubuntu have in store for us?

Ubuntu

Ramose rejects liberal human rights as a form of Western imperialism, and writes that “[a]fter decolonisation, the Western will to dominate manifests itself in the name of ‘democratisation’, ‘globalisation’ and ‘human rights’” (Ramose 1999, 3). According to Ramose, the human rights discourse does not make sense as long as it is not stripped of its liberal bias that alienates black Africans from their inalienable rights. Ramose refers in particular to their sovereign rights to South African territory. More generally, his communalist ubuntu ideal is incompatible with the liberal emphasis on individual rights.¹⁵

The Malawian philosopher Harvey Sindima even contends that “[t]he current value crisis among Africans is the result of the impact of liberal philosophy and discourse” (Sindima 1995, 27). Whereas liberalism gives priority to the individual and his rights, Sindima argues, African thinking abhors individualism (but not individuality). In the African view, people are interconnected in a web of life. “For the African, it is the respect for life and community that is a priority” (Sindima 1990, 190). Sindima refers to Mbiti’s dictum: “I am because we are”. In his view, it is particularly the introduction of Western education in Africa that undermines African cultural values. Liberal education aims to cultivate a critical mind so that the pupil can discover his/her own personal identity, freed from full immersion into group life. Actually, says Sindima, this has a disruptive effect on young people: “Traditional practices and authority were ignored since they were founded on ignorance and superstition” (ibid., 193).

What, then, is the right course? Ramose contrasts the Cartesian *I think, therefore I am* of Western philosophy with the African “we think”. Ubuntu is central to this:

Ubuntu is the root of African philosophy. The be-ing of an African in the universe is inseparably anchored upon ubuntu. Similarly, the African tree of knowledge stems from ubuntu with which it is connected indivisibly. Ubuntu then is the wellspring flowing with African ontology and epistemology (Ramose 1999, 49).

This applies to all the indigenous peoples of sub-Saharan Africa. And because mankind has spread from Africa to the world, all people can be seen as brothers and sisters in a global ubuntu family: “precolonial Africa was both the heartland of philosophical rationality and is most probably the birthplace of *homo sapiens*” (Ramose 1999, 44).

The ubuntu ideal is often explained with the Bantu proverb *umuntu ngumuntu nga bantu*: a person depends on other persons to be a person. In the paraphrase of Ramose: to be a human being is to affirm one’s humanity by recognising the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish human relations with them. Ubuntu in a moral sense, then, is the process by which one becomes an ethical human being by promoting the cosmic balance in just and caring dependency relationships (Matolino and Kwindigwi 2013, with reference to Mkhize 2008, and Karenga 2004).

15 Ramose refers to Gyekye’s definition of communalism: “Communalism is the doctrine that the group constitutes the main focus of the lives of the individual members of that group, and that the extent of the individual’s involvement in the interests, aspirations, and welfare of the group is the measure of that individual’s worth. This philosophy is given insitutional expression in the social structures of African society” (Gyekye 1987, 208; Ramose 1999, 143).

Ramose's African philosophy embeds ubuntu ethics in an African ontology and epistemology (Also see Ramose 2003; 2004; 2015; 2016). According to African ontology, we live in a floating world of vital forces that dance along to the cadence of a rhythmic music of the spheres – a dynamic universe that cannot be captured in fixed analytical concepts. The African world has no separation between subject and object, body and mind, ratio and emotion, or thinking and acting. “For the Africans, the invitation of the dance of be-ing is indeclinable since it is understood as an ontological and epistemological imperative...To dance along with be-ing is to be attuned to be-ing” (Ramose 2017, 59).

The fact that Westerners are able to listen passively to Bach and Beethoven on a chair for hours is characteristic of the Western fragmentation of being. From a moral point of view, therefore, *being* human is not enough: one must *become* human by finding one's place in the dynamic balance of “being becoming”, and in particular in community life.

An African community consists of both the living and the “living dead”, i.e. (in not entirely adequate Western terms) the spirits of the deceased ancestors, as well as those who have yet to be born. The ancestors protect the family community. “For this reason, it is imperative that the leader of the community, together with the elders of the community, must have good relations with their ‘living-dead’” (Ramose 2017, 64). This is a necessary condition for peace and justice. “Thus, African religion, politics and law are based on and suffused with the experience and concept of cosmic harmony” (ibid., 64).

According to the African philosophy of life, the individual gets to know himself and the surrounding world through his community. He is therefore part of a larger whole. In order to reach the status of a *person* one has to go through a number of ceremonial *rites of passage*. As long as you have not yet been initiated into the community and its values, you are only an “it”.¹⁶ “In traditional African thought personhood is, therefore, acquired and not merely established by virtue of the fact of being human (We note in parenthesis that the contemporary discourse on human rights may not therefore be taken as a matter of course for Africans)” (Ramose 2017, 81). Even after his death, the initiated person remains closely associated with his community.

The African legal order is therefore permeated by ancestral religion, says Ramose. The authority of the law depends on the approval of the ancestors, who ensure that society maintains a just balance. When they have spoken, the living must obey their will unconditionally. Note that ancestors are only there for their extended family and have nothing to do with the community as a whole.

Ramose points out that this religious element in the African legal view is incompatible with the Western liberal democratic constitutional state. Indeed, the ancestors are above the constitution: “The living-dead are recognised as simply ‘higher’” (Bewaji and Ramose 2003, 408). Since this is practised in large parts of Africa, Ramose finds it an urgent need to adapt the westernised legal order to the traditional African religion.

Furthermore, the multi-party system of the Western model of democracy should be replaced by a consensual democracy that reflects Africa's desire for harmony. The South African Bill of Rights must no longer serve as a touchstone for democratic decisions. “If we should be guided by the traditional principles of *oneness*, *consensus* and *openness*, and, I should like to add *humility*, then the day of the true liberation of Africa might not be too far away” (Ramose 1999, 145; emphasis in original).

The end of ubuntu?

However, the ubuntu ideal is controversial in African political philosophy. In *The End of Ubuntu* (2013), Bernard Matolino and Wenceslaus Kwindigwi argue that it is not viable as a political model. They see ubuntu as an outdated form of life that suited undifferentiated, small and close-knit communities: only there were the necessary feelings of solidarity able to flourish. Traditional community life is not only outdated, it also has major moral drawbacks because “such communities

¹⁶ “Initiation involves circumcision in the case of males and clitoridectomy in the case of females. In both cases, blood is spilled and the spilling of blood in traditional African thought is associated with making of sacrifice” (Ramose 1999, 88). The blood stands for making a covenant with the community, which obliges the initiated persons to marry and conceive children in order to ensure the group's survival.

are notorious for their dislike for outsiders, intolerance towards divergent ideas and place a high price and value on blood relations in recognising the other” (Matolino and Kwindigwi 2013, 202).

Ubuntu would therefore be at odds with tolerance, democracy and cosmopolitanism. As a traditionalist “narrative of return” it is not suitable for complex, multicultural societies. It imposes an idealised African way of life, which prevents Africans from thinking independently and developing divergent ideas. Such a monolithic model is counterproductive, Matolino and Kwindigwi argue. Look at the earlier “narratives of return” of African “philosophers-kings”, such as Nkrumah, Senghor, Nyerere and Kaunda, which resulted in dictatorship and poverty. In short, away with ubuntu.

In “Just the beginning for ubuntu: reply to Matolino and Kwindigwi” (2014a), Thaddeus Metz reacts to this by stating that it is only now that academic research and the political application of ubuntu have got off to a good start. Metz (2007) himself constructs a contemporary ethical theory based on ubuntu, in which he abstracts much more from African traditions than Ramose. Metz emphasises that he does not engage in descriptive cultural anthropology, but in normative philosophy by means of the techniques of analytical philosophy. His purpose is “to refashion the interpretation of ubuntu so that its characteristic elements are construed in light of our best current understandings of what is morally right” (Metz 2014a, 536). Metz’s “Afro-communitarianism” differs from Ramose’s ubuntu on two important points: it removes the ancestors from ontology and adds individual human rights to ethics (but still on a communitarian basis).

According to Metz’s modernised version of the ubuntu ideal, human beings have dignity due to their capacity to live in a community. This capacity consists of two parts: first, the capacity to identify with others and share a way of life with them (identity); secondly, the capacity to take care of the quality of life of those others (solidarity). In this way, Metz brings system into African oral traditions in an academic way, by reducing them to a central principle that encompasses and explains the prevailing moral intuitions. The fundamental principle underlying Metz’s ubuntu ideal is *friendship* or *love* (characterised by solidary identity). According to Metz, this implies the typically African model of consensual democracy as well as individual human rights. Indeed, violations of human rights can be seen as *unfriendly* and are therefore immoral. Because Metz anchors human dignity and human rights in a general human *capacity*, they are not dependent on initiation into a specific community.

Metz (2010; 2011; 2014b) expounds his view on human rights. He understands human rights to include classical freedom rights, social rights and group rights (to one’s own culture, etc.). He bases them on the communitarian ideal of friendship, not on the liberal idea of individual autonomy. This seems to be an arduous combination, as Oyowe contends in *Strange Bedfellows* (2013). Yet, Metz argues against this: in a friendly community, individual negative freedom rights, such as the right to religious freedom and the right to private life, are quite conceivable. Violations of these rights are, after all, a gross form of unfriendliness, and thus infringe on the dignity of man as a communal being. “That is the compelling moral perspective that I find in the sub-Saharan tradition that differs from typical Western accounts of wrongness as...disrespect of an individual’s autonomy...” (Metz 2014b, 310).

Ramose and Matolino strongly disagree with this. It will not come as a surprise that Ramose (2007) sharply criticises Metz’s modernist ubuntu interpretation. First of all, because Metz makes a caricature of ubuntu – Ramose speaks of “Metz’s vigorous battering upon a cadaverous caricature of ubuntu” (2007, 355). Secondly, because Metz’s reduction of ubuntu to the fundamental principle of friendship is unAfrican – Ramose speaks of “Metz’s search for an alien metaphysical *Grundnorm* to be implanted into the soil of Africa” (ibid.).

Matolino (2015) dismisses Metz’s interpretation as “ubuntu-talk” that is dogmatic rather than academic. Metz uses ubuntu for his own utopian political ideals; but if his theory is really “Metzian”, he must abandon any reference to the ubuntu tradition. This confirms the observation by Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013, 201) that “the notion of ubuntu has enjoyed such popular appeal that it can be said that it has become anything to anyone who so wishes to deploy it”.

Moreover, Matolino considers Metz’s Afro-communitarianism to be dangerous. Despite its embrace of human rights, it implies that the state incites citizens to a communalist way of life. After

all, Metz's emphasis on consensus rests on the assumption of a general well-being that is based on an identity of interests in a shared form of life. The danger of this model is that it does not recognise fundamental antagonisms, which makes it difficult to solve them in a reasonable way. The younger generation of African philosophers, led by Emmanuel Eze, therefore opposes the consensual democracy as recommended by older philosophers, such as Ramose, Gyekye and Wiredu. Indeed, in practice it meant replacing colonial oppression with an oppressive one-party state. According to Matolino, Metz's failing alternative therefore confirms the end of ubuntu.¹⁷

Jonathan Chimakonam (2016) stands up for Metz, at the expense of both Matolino and Ramose. According to Chimakonam (2016, 229), it is "the proper function of philosophers to employ the tool of logic in re-articulating pertinent worldview ideas at a higher level of understanding". Such a forward-looking project around ubuntu has indeed only just begun. Metz gives it a good start by transforming the traditional African view into a modern philosophical system, says Chimakonam.

Chimakonam does grant Matolino the honour of paving the way for this by criticising what Chimakonam calls *analytical tribalism*: the hitherto dominant defensive African philosophy that falls back on the past, such as ubuntu ontology. From now on, African philosophy can be practised in an open, conversational and critical way, without "struggle with the other".

It does seem therefore that it is to Matolino and Kwindingiwi that we now owe the gratitude of bringing African philosophy to ground zero where its questions may now be asked anew, afresh and in keeping with what Michael Eze calls "creative fidelity" (2010, 117) (Chimakonam 2016, 226).

May the real ubuntu stand up?

Evidently, ubuntu is an essentially contested concept. This makes Nyasha Mboti (2015) sigh: *May the Real Ubuntu Please Stand Up?* He points to the research of Gade (2012) into the history of the interpretation of the concept. The first written reference dates from 1846, but it was not until 1993 to 1995 that ubuntu was associated with the saying *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (also see Samkange and Samkange 1980). This recent interpretation has now been institutionalised and is supported by opposites such as Ramose and Metz. Mboti, however, rejects this communalist interpretation as a dictate of the intellectual and political elite. In his view, both Ramose and Metz are violating Africa's complex and rich reality.

Ramose's holistic definition of ubuntu, argues Mboti, is based on a one-sided view of African life as determined by dependency relationships: "What if this normative view is completely wrong? What if African persons want to reserve to themselves the right to be 'free' with or without, and because of or despite, being in community with other Africans?" (Mboti 2015, 139).

The fact that Ramose links the status of "person" to initiation into a family community is unacceptable because it turns Africans into nonpersons and "its" (Mboti 2015, 138). On the other hand, Mboti considers Ramose's ubuntu concept to be too vague because it does not sufficiently indicate what interdependence means.

Metz offers more analytical precision: Ubuntu revolves around a shared identity that is based on friendship or love. However, Mboti objects, this "greatest harmony" principle leads to illegitimate coercion. Can disharmony or competition not be just as good? Memberships are often multiple and subject to constant change, in which case *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* should also refer to messier, undisciplined interpersonal relationships. This re-interpretation leads to an African conflict ethic that creates space for individuals to freely choose and shape their relationships. In other words,

[s]ubstantially, what do Africans want? Who can claim to know, decisively, what Africans want? What gives Africans – a people marked by the complexity, richness, and profundity of their differences – peace, happiness, and satisfaction? What if Africans simply want to live *alongside* other Africans and not *through* them? (Mboti 2015, 140; emphasis in original).

According to Mboti, Africans are therefore not bound by one particular moral code: "we are always

¹⁷ For a discussion of "Limited Communitarianism", the alternative by Matolino (2014), see Oyowe (2015).

already a multiethnic people, involved in complex multiethnic interactions with others dependent on context” (Mboti 2015, 132). That is why ubuntu’s “greatest harmony” interpretation should be replaced by a version that recognises that every African is different and that Africans are people with and without a community.

Mboti concludes that the real ubuntu will *not* stand up. After all, no one can determine with certainty what African ethics entails. But that is no reason to abandon the ubuntu baby. Let her rather develop into a broad critical philosophy.

I suspect that ubuntu is really just another word for good African citizenship, an (impure) ethics of good citizenship based on independent thought and action, good sense, and informed choice in context (Mboti 2015, 144).

Surveying the discussion, Leonhard Praeg (2017, 297) observes that “by thinking ubuntu we are implicitly doing politics”. After all, there is no objective point of view from which to assess which interpretation is true. Although African philosophy is epistemologically and ontologically suspect because of its essentialism, Praeg maintains, it is nevertheless politically necessary in the South African context as a performative act that creates a common identity. It is inevitable that tradition will thus be reinvented (and consequently distorted for political purposes).

Praeg distinguishes two ways in which ubuntu is constructed: traditionalist *African communitarianism* and modernist *African humanism*. Ramose will belong to the first category, Metz to the second (although he himself calls his theory “Afro-communitarianism”). Both visions have drawbacks, cautions Praeg.

African communitarianism is based on the traditional African ontology that places the individual in a hierarchical system that is ordered according to the principles of masculinity and seniority. Such a hierarchy implies coercion and violence, which is why feminists oppose the traditionalist ubuntu ideal.¹⁸ (Ramose will argue that he praises feminists as co-combatants. On the other hand, he seems to regard the senior male members of the family as the wise spokesmen of the authoritative ancestors.)

Conceived as humanism, ubuntu “becomes synecdoche for a whole rainbow of good news”, such as “harmony”, “friendship” and “love” (Praeg 2017, 295). “Ubuntu is sentimentally reduced to everything nice” (ibid., 298). Praeg says, “I freely admit that it is up to individual scholars who take their cue from the context they work in to decide between the two frames of humanism and communitarianism when they interpret ubuntu” (ibid., 296).

Ubuntu: an essentially contested concept

In African political philosophy, then, ubuntu appears to be an essentially contested concept. The meta-concept of *essentially contested concept* was coined by Gallie (1956a) to analyse the polysemic character of abstract, qualitative and evaluative notions, such as *art*, *justice* and *humanity*. To be essentially contested, Gallie maintains, a concept has to meet four criteria: (1) it should be *evaluative*; (2) *complex*, i.e. have various dimensions; (3) can be described and ordered in different ways; and (4) *open* to new developments. Yet, the conflicting interpretations are related in that they derive from traditional authoritative exemplars.¹⁹ Gallie adds that parties to the conceptual contest defend their interpretation as the only true one and attack their opponents for proclaiming false views.

Waldron (2002b) has rephrased this as a distinction between *concept* and *conception*, as follows,

18 For a feminist critique of ubuntu communitarianism, see Oyowe and Yurkivska (2014). In their view, the – largely male – ubuntu philosophers, such as Ramose, try to build an African identity on the basis of communal African values in the face of Western philosophy. In doing so, they do not sufficiently recognise that African traditions treat women unequally. Ubuntu philosophers tend to deny this, arguing that these traditions are egalitarian because men and women have an equal core (*okra*) in common, or because the sexes fulfil complementary but equivalent roles in society. Because of this, women would be entitled to equal respect. However, feminist critics object, the same philosophers link personhood to socialisation in the traditional community roles of a patriarchal society. At that level, the division of labour between men and women implies that they have asymmetric social functions linked to inequality in status, rights and economic prosperity.

19 On the problematic aspect of “exemplars”, see Collier, Hidalgo and Maciuceanu (2006).

we imagine people advancing and defending (and criticizing and modifying) rival conceptions of the concept. Various conceptions might cite lists of attributes that stand in a “family-resemblance” relation to one another, and they might offer rival accounts of how the distinct attributes go together to make up the valued achievement that all the conceptions are trying to give an account of... Each conception is put forward as an attempt to outdo others in capturing an elusive sense, that we all share, a sense that somewhere in the midst of this contestation there is an important ideal that social and political systems should aspire to (Waldron 2002b, 150).

Although at a highly abstract and polysemic level agreement may exist on the exemplary meaning of an essentially contested concept (for instance, “justice” means treating like cases alike), it is interpreted in various reasonable yet incompatible ways. In other words, the concept can be elaborated into diverse conflicting conceptions that are all defensible.

In this sense, the concept of *ubuntu* is indeed essentially contestable. Its connotations range from its original manifestations in pre-colonial African traditions (that may be reconstructed by historical anthropology) to current trendy extensions into the global spheres of mindfulness and artificial intelligence. Within the context of political philosophy, too, *ubuntu* is the subject of intense academic contest. Some African philosophers consider *ubuntu* to be a moribund notion; others see it as a vital concept par excellence. In the latter case, *ubuntu* is elaborated from sundry incompatible political theories, ranging from African nationalism (Ramose) via humanist communitarianism (Metz) to liberalism (Mboti).

Yet parties to the philosophical contest will object that the concept of *ubuntu* is contested but not *essentially* contested.²⁰ After all, each of the contestants claims that his interpretation is the only true one. All contrary views would suffer from demonstrable errors, such as lack of academic rigour, reliance on inadequate literature, ignorance of relevant African traditions and languages, or downright immorality. This would imply that in the end a reasonable consensus could be reached on a correct interpretation of *ubuntu*, which can then serve as the basic constitutional principle for African nations, or even as a worldwide standard.

What is one to make of this objection? It depends on the context. For sure, anthropological descriptions of the *ubuntu* tradition can be judged on their truth-value. In contrast, in political philosophy *ubuntu* figures as an evaluative concept that is open to competing reasonable interpretations. At a very abstract level, agreement may exist on its exemplary meaning: *Ubuntu* “stands for universalized humanness (*ubuntu/botho*) values, which are shared across cultures, and which include care, respect, tolerance, honesty, hospitality, compassion and empathy” (Koenane and Olatunji 2017, 263). Thus defined, the concept is internally complex and polysemic par excellence. It raises many questions that can lead to conflicting answers: Is *ubuntu* about compassion with humankind in general, or with specific groups, or with individuals? What is required to qualify as a subject of *ubuntu*? How does respect for the individual relate to caring for the community? And so on. This very broad concept allows for nationalist, communitarian and liberal conceptions, which confirms that “*ubuntu*” is essentially contested.

Yet, it may be possible to eliminate some interpretations as improper in the domain of political philosophy. A first candidate for exclusion may be the liberal conception, along the following line of argument. One could argue that in the political context the core meaning of *ubuntu* includes an additional defining element: *Ubuntu* reflects an authentic African worldview. After all, the point of placing *ubuntu* in the centre of African political philosophy is to reinforce African identity in the face of Western imperialism. This broader core meaning may imply that the liberal conception should be rejected as an improper elaboration in the light of Africa’s traditional communalism, although as a persuasive definition it is a successful rhetorical move.²¹ Indeed, if the concept of *ubuntu* were open to such inversions of its original meaning, anything goes.

20 Notably, because competing interpretations “can be shown, as a result of analysis or experiment, to be radically confused” (Gallie 1956a, 180).

21 This disqualifies liberalism only as a member of the *ubuntu* family, not as a political position as such.

Even if liberalism is eliminated, however, ubuntu still is an essentially contested concept. As Praeg points out, it is the stake of an ideological identity struggle between traditionalist and nationalist *African communitarianism* on the one side and modernist *African humanism* on the other side. Both conceptions take traditional African communalism as their starting point. According to Praeg, each may come with unwelcome consequences. The traditionalist conception may reinforce the suppressive tendencies of hierarchical traditions. The humanistic conception may degenerate into vague rosy notions such as “harmony”, “friendship” and “love”.

Cannot Metz’s humanist interpretation of ubuntu be eliminated in a similar way as liberalism? After all, his opponents reject his *Afro-communitarianism* as unAfrican: they see it as an exasperating cultural appropriation of the authentic concept. Or, to put it in a friendlier way, Metzian humanist communitarianism might be rejected as an improper conception because it would be just the same without reference to ubuntu. Does this criticism hold? Koenane seems to take Metz seriously as an advocate of the communalist ubuntu ethic:

This ethic of responsibility and care is well expressed by Metz as follows: An action is right just insofar as it is a way of living harmoniously or prizing communal relationships, ones in which people identify with each other and exhibit solidarity with one another (Metz 2009b, 183) (Koenane 2017 and Olatunji, 5).

Moreover, Metz’s communitarianism is *Afro* in that it endorses consensual democracy. Metz’s addition of human rights is based on the very same communalist ethic of responsibility and care. Ramose may object that Metz’s summary of ubuntu in the single basic principle of *friendship* violates the open character of African thinking: Ubuntu deteriorates into Metzianism. But Metz might reply that “friendship” itself is an open notion. In sum, *Afro-communitarianism* can be seen as a serious effort to update the tradition of African communalism that at least deserves the benefit of the doubt.

Still, it may be possible to eliminate some other interpretations of ubuntu as pointless in the political domain, especially at the extremes of the traditionalist and the humanist conceptions: extreme traditionalism descends into *primitivism*, extreme humanism degenerates into vague smooth talk. If ubuntu coincided with one of these views, its end as a vital concept in current political discourse would surely be imminent.

As to the traditionalist extreme: a full return to pre-colonial traditions, also known as “primitivism” (Koenane and Olatunji 2017), is evidently impossible. This view can therefore be eliminated as pointless, but that does not help much, since no one is advocating a narrative of complete return. In this respect, the views of Ramose and Metz are not as far apart as they may seem. Both aim at reconstructing African traditions in the light of contemporary philosophy and the demands of present-day society. Ramose emphasises the dynamic character of the African worldview, which does not allow for conceptualisation in rigid “isms” and implies that customs change with the flow of time. His aim is not to return to an idealised past, but to restore the continuity of the African way of life that has been disrupted by Western imperialism. Metz also wants to update ubuntu, but in a more radical way.

This leaves us with a profound controversy in the ubuntu debate: to what extent should old traditions play a role in contemporary law and politics? Obviously Ramose endorses many elements of the ancient African traditions. Although it is not always clear where he is practising descriptive cultural anthropology and where normative philosophy, nowhere does he assume a critical distance from the customs he describes. His African philosophy through ubuntu explicitly applauds respect for the ancestors and the elderly, initiation into one’s community as a requirement for acquiring personhood, and the idea that law and justice are determined by supernatural forces (the living dead) and declared on their behalf by the living who are in authority.²² Metz’s conception of ubuntu, in contrast, is abstracted from these traditional elements, in an effort to transform and update African communalism into the more open ideal of friendship.

22 It is unclear whether Ramose would consider women as persons who have equal rights, or, more traditionally, as persons of equal worth but with different social roles and duties.

Here we may arrive at the pointless antithesis of “primitivism”, namely the extreme of Afro-humanism: Ubuntu is in danger of degenerating into vague smooth talk. Critics of the humanistic conception contend that *friendship* is too vague to be meaningful in political philosophy. Metz, however, is not affected by this criticism, for he gives a further specification of friendship in terms of “solidary identity”. One may still object that Metz’s reasoning is rather loose, notably where he derives human rights from friendship. Indeed, one may maintain that violations of human rights are “unfriendly”, but one can just as well argue that appeals to individual rights are “unfriendly” since they disrupt social harmony. Moreover, Oyowe (2013) rightly objects that Metz presents no solution for conflicts between communal well-being and individual rights. But these are inadequacies that may be rectified. All in all, Metz’s *Afro-communitarianism* can be considered a meaningful (but not a better) extension of the core meaning of ubuntu, which confirms the thesis that ubuntu is an essentially contested concept.

In sum, in the South African political context some conceptions may be eliminated as improper extensions of ubuntu, notably the liberal inversion of the concept. However, this does not put an end to all the problems. The more ubuntu is limited to conceptions that are in keeping with the traditional all-inclusive African worldview and way of life, the more it excludes liberal Africans and citizens of Asian and European descent. In other words, conceptual curtailment reduces the contest within the concept, but the struggle continues in the extra-conceptual political debate. Moreover, essentially, ubuntu continues to be a contested concept.

Conclusion: Ubuntu versus political liberalism

This conclusion does not usher in the end of ubuntu. The concept should continue to play a central role in discussions about African identity. It may also serve as a source of inspiration for political debate. However, an essentially contested ideological concept should not be a decisive constitutional standard for the application of state force. After all, one may reasonably disagree about its interpretation, so that it would be unreasonable to enforce one particular ideological view on all citizens. Therefore, ubuntu is not suitable as a basic principle for a constitution.

I should not leave it at this conclusion, otherwise I would be guilty of the same failure that Koenane finds worrisome in the work of Matolino and Kwindigwi: instead of presenting a preferable alternative to ubuntu, “they leave a vacuum, taking what appears to be the easy way out” (Koenane 2017 and Olatunji, 266). What could be the alternative?

This challenge brings us back to liberalism, particularly in the “light” version of *political* liberalism. Indeed, the constitutional model of political liberalism provides a reasonable alternative, as it is designed precisely to solve the problem of social plurality and ideological contest. It aims to deal with the central political problem of modern plural societies: how to cooperate on fair terms in spite of deep ideological controversies? (also see Maris 2018a). Moreover, this light version of liberalism may be acceptable to people who are attached to communal traditions because it does not start from individual autonomy.

In *Political Liberalism* (1996), John Rawls argues that in a modern open society inevitably a multitude of worldviews and life ideals will emerge about which we can reasonably disagree. It would be *unreasonable* to impose one of these views by means of state coercion. Therefore, the state should abstain from contested moral ideals concerning life as a whole. To find neutral common ground, political liberalism retreats to a meta-perspective. It does not present a view of the good life, but confines itself to the design of a fair constitution that enables cooperation between individuals with conflicting views of the good life.

The solution is mutual tolerance: *let’s agree to disagree*. On the constitutional level, this requires a neutral state that does not impose any contested ideology or religion. Individual freedom rights guarantee a private domain in which each citizen can think and act as he prefers, as long as he respects the equal freedom of others. A just distribution of socio-economic goods (including restorative justice) guarantees that all have equal opportunities to make use of their liberties.

Political liberalism is less alien to the African communal way of life than its controversial cousin, “metaphysical” liberalism: it is not based upon the Western metaphysical ideal of individual

autonomy.²³ Rawls agrees with communitarians that individuals do not enter society by their free choice. On the contrary, we “find ourselves growing up in this society and in this position” (Rawls 1996, 41). He only maintains that in a plural society, persons are not attached to fixed social roles and ideals of the good life. Since we can compare different ideals and ways of life, we are capable of revising our views on reasonable grounds. Therefore, individuals should be free from enforcement of particular perfectionist ideals. As indicated, political liberalism distances itself from all comprehensive metaphysical worldviews, including metaphysical liberalism, because these are all essentially contested. Instead, it restricts itself to providing a pragmatic solution to the political question: *How can we coexist peacefully and on fair terms, despite our profound ideological conflicts?*

Contrary to the argument of some communitarians, liberalism’s individual freedom does not end in selfishness or amorality. On the contrary, political liberalism presupposes cooperation on the basis of reciprocity and mutual respect. Individuals are committed to liberal virtues, such as respect for other people’s beliefs and property, solidarity with fellow citizens who cannot take care of themselves, and respect for democratic laws. Mutual respect and tolerance, then, are the preferable constitutional principles for modern open societies. And ubuntu? Ubuntu has no clear ending or beginning; it continues being an essential concept and way of life in the broader background culture.

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23 Locke’s political philosophy combines both strands of liberalism, which are nowadays conceived as two distinct ways of justifying a liberal constitution. *Metaphysical* is his foundation of freedom and tolerance on the assumption that God has created all human beings with the capacity for independent thinking. Locke’s secular arguments for toleration as the proper way to social peace and justice can be seen as an anticipation of *political* liberalism: “It is not the diversity of opinions (which cannot be avoided), but the refusal of toleration to those that are of different opinions (which might have been granted), that has produced all the bustles and wars that have been in the Christian world upon account of religion” (Locke 1991, 52). Both Locke’s secular arguments for toleration and Rawls’s political liberalism appeal to the historical lessons that Europeans have learned from the disastrous religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries: it is better to pacify ideological conflicts through mutual tolerance.

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