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# UBUNTU IN SOUTH AFRICA: HOPES AND DISAPPOINTMENTS – A PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

## ABSTRACT

*The indigenous sub-Saharan African philosophy of ubuntu that comes down to the expression: “I am a human being because of being with other human beings”, developed over centuries. This philosophy, embodying the notion of deep respect for all human beings, is rooted in a humane inclination towards kindness and sound relationships among all people. Before its adoption as a principle in the South African Interim Constitution of 1993, ubuntu had never been referred to, or codified in any statutory format. Since then, however, although not mentioned in the final Constitution of 1996, the humane undertones of the ubuntu philosophy have often surfaced in South African jurisprudence, particularly in cases involving citizens’ Constitutional right to human dignity (section 10). This paper examines the phenomenon that the actual modern-day practical, day-to-day life in South Africa does not seem to attest to application of the ubuntu ideal of maintaining and improving the human condition. After examining a number of possible reasons for this phenomenon, ubuntu-gogy is presented as a possible remedy for this condition. This paper reports on an interdisciplinary analysis involving philosophical, societal, anthropological, legal and pedagogical perspectives. A mixed method research methodology in the form of a social science based interpretive-constructivist qualitative approach combined with a legal approach was followed.*

**Keywords:** *Crime; education; human dignity; jurisprudence; South African Constitution; ubuntu-gogy; ubuntu.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Ubuntu* has for centuries been the informal and largely tacit philosophy of life or life-view of Africans south of the Sahara. It has only relatively recently, particularly after the introduction of writing, been variously formulated and still more recently been adopted as a philosophical guideline in the South African Interim Constitution (1993), in subsequent legislation and in jurisprudence. This paper concentrates on the question of whether the ideals and values encapsulated in the *ubuntu* concept can be observed in the everyday lives and conduct of ordinary South Africans, and if not, what pedagogical remedies could be applied in an effort to address their inability to have an impact on the daily conduct of South Africans.

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The *ubuntu* philosophy of life or life-view of the indigenous people of sub-Saharan Africa emerged in South Africa during the 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries (Shutte, 2001: 9). The term “ubuntu” itself has been appearing in South African written sources only from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. In essence, as explained in more detail below, the word “ubuntu” simply refers to the conviction that a person can only be a complete person in togetherness with other people, that one’s existence is intimately entwined with the fate and well-being of others. (The meaning of the word, which appears in a variety of forms, formulations and configurations all over southern Africa, has recently been considerably amplified, as also explained below.)

The purpose of this paper is to report on our investigations into how, on the one hand, the *ubuntu* tenets and ideals have been adopted and incorporated in South African constitutional and education-related legislation and jurisprudence to serve as a basis for adjudging the appropriateness of South African citizens’ conduct and, on the other hand, the extent to which South Africans on the ground have been conducting themselves in accordance with these guiding principles or values. The investigation was sparked by our inference that many, even most, South African citizens seem to be either ignorant of the demands and guidelines encapsulated in *ubuntu* for proper, ethically and socially justifiable behaviour, or that they prefer to overlook this moral guideline. We revisit this inference in the concluding sections of the paper.

## 3. RESEARCH METHOD AND THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

This paper is the product of hermeneutical-constructivist investigations into various aspects of the problem as outlined above (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). We first applied hermeneutics, the science of text interpretation (Babbie & Mouton, 2007) for the purpose of interpreting the relevant statutes (Botha, 1996), court reports and other literature. Purposive sampling was done to identify the court cases relevant to this study. A computer search centring on the term “ubuntu” and on concomitant human rights principles as per the South African Constitution (1996) allowed the court cases discussed below to surface. The reports resulting from these court cases were interpreted from a legal-historical perspective (Venter *et al.*, 1990). We then applied the interpretive-constructivist method by utilising the data flowing from the first – the interpretive – phase of the investigation to construct, develop and conceptualise new perspectives regarding the research problem (Van der Walt, 2020).

The investigation reported in this paper was inspired by our concern as educationists about the socio-cultural conditions prevailing in South Africa in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly the apparent lack of moral consciousness that we observe in the daily conduct of South Africans, a matter that we return to in the section below entitled “The conduct of South Africans as viewed in the *ubuntu* mirror”. Our attention was drawn to this problem by Lahti and Weinstein’s (2005: 48) proposition that there seems to be “a significant variation that humans exhibit in individual commitment to moral norms”, such as those encapsulated in the *ubuntu* philosophy or life- and worldview. We were intrigued by their assumption that the variation in people’s moral behaviour could be ascribed to what could be referred to as “adaptive responses to dynamic social environments” and “social influences”. They base their assumption on what they refer to as group stability theory. The theory holds that, despite moral absolutism (as, in this case, arguably embodied in *ubuntu* principles), people’s lives exhibit variation in commitment and adherence to the moral rules that they supposedly recognise.

People's behaviour does not always match the moral rules espoused by them; the moral rules might be absolute but people's adherence to them is facultative (Lahti & Weinstein, 2005). Our study can be construed as a test for the validity of this proposition.

#### 4. THE MEANING OF THE TERM "UBUNTU"

When literally translated from, for instance, the Zulu version, the term simply means "a person is only a person when he or she is with, or together with, other people". "Ubuntu," a somewhat elusive concept that can be explored in a variety of contexts (Cilliers, 2008), encapsulates a basic tenet of traditional life and existence, namely that the communal well-being of an individual depends on togetherness, on living in close proximity, and in caring relationships with others in the community (Cilliers, 2008; Shara, 2008; Van der Walt, 2010). In other words, life centres on teamwork and brotherhood; a person is connected to others, and brings life with them (Lundin & Nelson, 2010). *Ubuntu* can also display a dark side, according to Cilliers (2008), in that it can degenerate into an oppressive conformity and blind loyalty to the group or clan. Failure to conform might be met with harsh punitive measures. A lively debate towards attaining consensus during a meeting (*indaba*) could result in "stifling conformity". Even in such conditions, the essence of *ubuntu* remains to affirm unity and at the same time to value and endorse diversity. Bangura (2017: 89, 95) summarised the meaning of "ubuntu" as simply "showing humanity towards others". It is interesting to note, as Vervliet (2009: 55, 58) did, that *ubuntu* displays similarities with philosophies that originated in non-African civilisations, such as the Islamic *Shakçânnye* and Christian-democratic personalism.

Gradually, however, the semantic field of the term was expanded to also embrace and denote humanness, humanity, virtue, goodness and kindness. Bishop Desmond Tutu (1999), for instance, extended its meaning by explaining that the characteristics of an *ubuntu* person included that he or she is one that is interconnected in a network of togetherness, who attempts to understand rather than take vengeance, who strives towards reparation instead of retaliation, who is generous and hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate, who shares what he or she possesses, who is open to the avail of other humans – affirming them instead of feeling threatened by their successes since they are secure in belonging to the unimpaired oneness with a bigger whole. Lundin and Nelson (2010: 118), likewise, expanded its meaning by stating that it contains a "formula for human happiness". According to them,

...*ubuntu* [is] the ancient African philosophy that draws on the fact that we are all one human family. We are brothers and sisters, traveling this earth together. When one man is poorly fed, all are malnourished. When one is abused, we all feel the pain. When a child suffers, the tears wash over us all. By recognising the humanity of one another, we recognise our unbreakable bond – our unbreakable link to the whole of humanity (Lundin & Nelson, 2010: 118).

Other authors similarly amplified its meaning. Bower (2005: 285) contended that it means that "we are created in and through our relationships with other people" and that it embraces "the infinitely complex set of reflective relationships between individual and community". Van der Walt (2010) suggested that it encapsulated the values of human dignity, humanism, empathy, respect, interactive dependency, collective responsibility, peace, friendliness, forgiveness, sharing, a sense of connectedness, altruism, understanding, respect for individual differences, knowledge of self and others, goodness, generosity and benevolence. Bangura (2017), in turn, contended that *ubuntu* meant humanity, fellow-feeling or kindness. It "articulates a basic respect and compassion for others, which can be interpreted as both a

factual description and a rule of conduct or social ethic. It both describes the human being as 'being-with-others' and prescribes what that should be" (Bangura, 2017: 96).

The South African Ministry of (Basic) Education's (2001) *Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy* (RSA, 2001: 1–3) arguably contains one of the most detailed expositions of the term "ubuntu": "...*ubuntu* embodies the concept of mutual understanding and the active appreciation of the value of human difference..." Based on this, equality, non-racism, non-sexism, openness, reconciliation and respect to be instilled in young people should be striven for (RSA, 2001: 4). Out of these values of *ubuntu* and human dignity (should):

flow the practices of compassion, kindness, altruism and respect... Equality might require us to put up with people who are different, non-sexism and non-racism might require us to rectify the inequities of the past, but *ubuntu* goes much further: it embodies the concept of mutual understanding and the active appreciation of the value of human difference. It requires you to know others if you are to know yourself, and if you are to understand your place – and others' – within a multicultural environment. Ultimately, *ubuntu* requires you to respect others if you are to respect yourself (RSA, 2001: 14).

Former South African President, Thabo Mbeki, as part of his African Renaissance campaign, reverted to the values contained in the *ubuntu* philosophy in his search for the roots of African identity (Pityana, 2017). Prozesky (2009: 5) concluded that it is important to take cognisance of *ubuntu* due to its admirable and respectful approach towards humankind and community. In his opinion, as a philosophy, it is relevant "in a world beset by violence, greed and environmental damage of potentially catastrophic kind" (ibid).

Given such positive assessments of *ubuntu*, it is no wonder that the *ubuntu* ideal began reverberating in the post-1993 South African Constitution and in subsequent legislation.

## 5. THE RECOGNITION OF UBUNTU TENETS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONSTITUTION, LEGISLATION AND IN JURISPRUDENCE

### 5.1 Adoption in the Constitutional domain

The post-1993 South African constitutional dispensation witnessed the accelerated emergence of *ubuntu* applications, not only in the form of local academic publications but also in the legal spheres of legislation and jurisprudence. By 2018, it was not only referred to in the Interim Constitution of South Africa (1993), but also in at least 39 reported court cases, including 19 Constitutional Court cases and two Supreme Court cases of Appeal (Bennet, Munro & Jacobs *et al.*, 2018: 60).<sup>1</sup>

*Ubuntu* got a foothold in the South African constitutional domain when it was recognised in the Interim Constitution (1993) and consequently became the *ratio decidendi* for many of the judgments in South African courts (Pityana, 2017).

1 We are indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers of this article drawing our attention to the research of Masehela and Pillay (2014) who examined the sexual abuse of young girls in a rural area in Limpopo. Based on their research, they inferred that the *ubuntu* philosophy can sometimes lead to a violation of the Constitution of South Africa (1996). *Ubuntu* historically occurred in an environment that did not possess a constitution as the supreme law of the land or the community. According to them, one could to an extent blame the *ubuntu* philosophy for the fact that girls are being sexually abused. One of the precepts of *ubuntu* is that one should not look for punishment for perpetrators outside of the community in which they live but that the community itself should accept responsibility for «rehabilitating» the offender (Masehela & Pillay, 2014: 31–32).

Its epilogue refers to the ideals of *ubuntu* as the basis for the formulation of constitutional objectives:

The promulgation of this Constitution lays the secure foundation for the people of South Africa to transcend the divisions and strife of the past, which generated gross violations of human rights, the transgression of humanitarian principles in violent conflicts and a legacy of hatred, fear, guilt and revenge. These can now be addressed on the basis that there is a need for understanding, but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for *ubuntu* but not for victimisation (South Africa, 1993).

## 5.2 Its manifestations in jurisprudence

An analysis of court cases since the adoption of the South African Constitution in 1996 reveals that *ubuntu* precepts came to the fore in a relatively small number of cases where the judges found such principles to be *ad rem*. In the 2011 Equality Court case of *Afriforum and Another v Malema and others*, Justice Colin Lamont described *ubuntu* as an important source of law in instances of broken human relationships between individuals, and even communities. He argued that the application of the tenets of *ubuntu* could assist in providing solutions that might contribute to therapeutic remedies between aggrieved parties. This verdict also served to expand the meaning of the *ubuntu* concept and philosophy of life to embrace much more than its original meaning of well-being through togetherness.

### *Human dignity*

The right to human dignity was a pivotal argument in the *State v Makwanyane* court case which dealt with the abolition of the death penalty. Six of the eleven judges of the Constitutional Court emphasised the philosophy of *ubuntu* to be the major reason for the abolition of the death penalty (Bennett *et al.*, 2018). In the main judgement delivered by Justice Chaskalson, he linked the culture of *ubuntu* and its human inclinations to the Constitutional value of human dignity (Himonga, 2011). Among others, he said that:

...to be consistent with the value of *ubuntu*, South Africa should be a society that wishes to prevent crime ...not to kill criminals simply to get even with them.

The court also noted that the constitutional right to human dignity (section 10) was “an integral part of *ubuntu*” (Himonga, 2011: 45).

The *ubuntu* concept is now well established in South African jurisprudence dealing with human dignity (Keep & Midgley, 2007), also in an educational context, for example, regarding corporal punishment in schools. In the Constitutional Court case of *Christian Education South Africa (CESA) v Minister of the Government of the Republic of South Africa* of 2000, Justice Sachs dismissed CESA’s appeal regarding their Biblical approach to the infliction of corporal punishment in schools. With reference to article 37(a) of the United Nation Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), the Judge typified corporal punishment as a (human) degrading practice.

### *Conflict resolution, also in pedagogical context*

The 1997 *Bophuthatswana British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) v Ramaphosa and others* court case emphasised the *ubuntu* approach to conflict resolution (*cf.* Bennett *et al.*, 2018: 63). Referring to various moral systems such as *ubuntu*, Justice Khumalo ruled that the union’s right to petition may not “unduly violate” the BBC personnel’s right to freedom of movement. The same principle was also applied in educational contexts where conflicts arose. The principle of “the best interest of the child” was applied as a fundamental human

right in the court case of *MEC for Education in Gauteng Province and Other v Governing Body Rivonia Primary School and Others*. In this matter, the hostility between the particular School Governing Body and the Provincial Department of Education left a young learner helpless in that it denied her access to the “filled to capacity” primary school in question. The verdict was in favour of the learner.

### *Emphasis on equality*

The Constitutional Court case of *Hoffmann v South African Airways* (2001) dealt with the applicant’s unsuccessful application for the vacancy of cabin attendant. The reason for the rejection came as a result of his HIV-positive status. He petitioned that, in view of his constitutional right to equality, the refusal constituted unfair discrimination. Justice Ngcobo held that the refusal to appoint Mr Hoffmann indeed constituted unfair discrimination of people living with HIV, and that, in actual fact, it constituted unfair discrimination to a person from a vulnerable group prone to severe societal prejudice. Moreover, not only did this refusal contravene his right to equality, but it also infringed on his right to human dignity.

### *Unethicality of delay*

In *New Clicks of South Africa (Pty) Ltd v Minister of Health and another* (2005) the appellant petitioned the lower court’s delay in their application for leave to appeal to the High Court. Once it did enter the High Court, Justice Harms, in referring to the maxim that “justice delayed is justice denied,” held that the spirit of *ubuntu* not only applies between individuals; it also applies to the relationship between citizens and organs of state – and hence it also applies to relationships between courts and organs.

The matter of delay arose also in an educational context. In 2000, the issues of equality as well as of delay was emphasised in the matter of *Harris v Minister of Education*. In her application, the mother of a child (Nancy) contended, on the basis of a psychological report confirming her daughter’s readiness for school, that the Department of Education’s refusal to provide her under-aged daughter access to grade one constituted unfair discrimination on the basis of age. The judge ruled in favour of the plaintiff.

The question now arises whether the ideals and aspirations embodied in the *ubuntu* philosophy and ideal, and as encapsulated in the Constitution and in subsequent legislation and jurisprudence, can be seen as coming to expression in the everyday lives of ordinary South Africans.

## 6. THE CONDUCT OF SOUTH AFRICANS AS VIEWED IN THE UBUNTU MIRROR

Crime statistics released in July 2020 show that South Africans have in the two previous years in many ways acted in ways that are in contravention of the values and the spirit typical of the *ubuntu* philosophy of life. Tables 1 and 2 below present the actual numbers of some of the most severe forms of inhumane conduct of one person against another such as murder, attempted murder and sexual assault. Table 1 presents the actual numbers of serious contact criminality against the most vulnerable sector of the population – women and children, and Table 2 presents the numbers of such crimes perpetrated against males. All these crimes are in direct violation of *ubuntu* values.

**Table 1:** Serious contact crimes against women and children (u.18) in 2017/18

Crime	Numbers: women	Numbers: children (u.18)	Totals per crime
Murder	2,783	985	3768
Sexual offences	28,632	23,488	52,120
Serious assault	52,101	7562	59,663
Common assault	79,678	10,466	90,144

Total: 205,695

Source: SAPS annual report 2017/18, [www.saps.gov.za](http://www.saps.gov.za)

**Table 2:** Serious contact crimes against males in 2017/18

Crime	Totals
Murder	16,440
Attempted murder	13,668
Serious assault	106,692
Common assault	64,867

Total: 201,667

Source: SAPS Annual Report 2017/18

These two tables paint a dismal picture of life and conduct in South Africa: a total of more than 400 000 reported serious contact crimes against South African females, children and males committed in a single year.

A comparison of South Africa's crime rate with those of other countries reveals that South Africans, despite the legal support given to *ubuntu*, have in the recent past displayed levels of misconduct comparable with those of countries infamous for violence and crime. According to Numbeo Crime Rankings by Country (2020), South Africa ranked fourth among 133 countries in 2019 (after Venezuela, Papua New Guinea and Honduras); its condition had deteriorated crime-wise by the middle of 2020 – it now ranks third after Venezuela and Papua New Guinea. Its score on the Crime Index has also gone up, from 76.80 in 2019 to 77.29 by mid-2020.

The following comparison provides further insight into the dreary state of affairs in South Africa. South Africa and Hungary became fully democratic countries at around the same time in the early 1990s. In 2016, South Africa recorded 58.94 crimes per 100 000 of its population whereas Hungary recorded 41.42. The statistics for all crimes in South Africa are consistently higher than those in Hungary. The most disturbing of these statistics is the murder ratio: 1.34 murders per 100 000 of the population in Hungary, as opposed to 34 per 100 000 in South Africa in 2017 (nationmaster.com, 2017). The latter number has increased to 36 per 100 000 of the population in 2019 – an average of around 58 murders per day. (The same number for Australia in 2019 was only 9.5 per 100 000 of the population) (Owen, 2020: 11).

In a recent address, Ike (2017: 18) referred to several “cases of scandals” perpetrated by South Africans. The perpetrations include corruption and nepotism, even during the Covid-19 epidemic, among others, the supply of personal protection equipment to the government at around ten times the normal price. At the same conference, Lemmer (2017: 91) spoke about “gross violations of ethical behaviour”. According to Baijnath (2017: 184), the social, political

and economic volatility that has plagued South Africa for the past two to three decades has found expression on the ground in the form of conflicts and protest action. Osman (2017) came to much the same conclusion about the state of society in South Africa: there seems to be a lack of accountability among South Africans, and this leads to many kinds of violence (including gender-based) and ill-discipline. In the same vein, Daniel (2018) mentions perpetrations such as angry behaviour, including the use of knives and guns. He has observed community-based violence being perpetrated throughout society.

A few years before that, Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013: 197) began their paper by describing a disturbing incident in the streets of the city of Bloemfontein in the Free State province of South Africa.

Pityana (2017: 139, 141) summarises the situation in South Africa as follows:

South Africa can do without the aggressive and angry conduct that has become our national pastime, violence-ridden, selfish, and self-centred, living with distrust and mutual suspicion. [...] Only listen to politicians decry to high heaven the incidence of crime and threatening that action will be taken against any found guilty of corruption. In truth, we know, that in the same vein the same politicians are engaged in corrupt dealings, and that resources of the state are being diverted to non-legitimate purposes ... huge deals are to be made, ... divert the resources of the state ... the word 'honour' no longer has meaning. All this has become a common signifier of being a South African.

It is important to note that one cannot posit a direct causal link or a clear relationship to exist between (non-)adherence to *ubuntu* precepts and values among South Africans, and their daily conduct. Societies are too complex and highly variegated for such a surmise. We can observe, however, that although in theory most South Africans should be acquainted with the values of *ubuntu* as the centuries-old and traditionally ingrained philosophy of life of Africans south of the Sahara, and although this philosophy has found expression in legislation and in jurisprudence, the values associated with the *ubuntu* philosophy of life seem not to have found expression in the daily conduct of South Africans. It seems as if South Africans today lack the inspirational moral force of the *ubuntu* philosophy in their dealings with other people. This conclusion ties in with Willemse's (2021: 14): "Something has gone amiss in our country. It is as if the morality that has bound us together as a society is slowly on the wane".

Observations such as the above about the conduct of South Africans moved Bennett, Munro and Jacobs (2018: 6) to conclude that the modern-day application of the African ethos of *ubuntu* appears to be a far cry from its core tenets. In their opinion, *ubuntu* now appears to be "nothing more than an empty ideal". The following section explores a number of possible reasons for this condition.

## 7. POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS FOR THE ABSENCE OF AN UBUNTU SENSE OF MORALITY

The question now arises: To what can this condition be ascribed? What could be the reasons for South Africans to demonstrate an unawareness of the traditional values that form the core of the *ubuntu* philosophy of life?

More than two decades ago, Van Binsbergen (2002) proffered the following explanation. According to him, many Africans have always been unaware of the fact that their traditional philosophy of life is referred to as "ubuntu". For them, the name remains implicitly in the background; they simply live according to *ubuntu* precepts in as far as they are conscious of



them. As mentioned, the *ubuntu* concept only crystallised because of careful analyses and discursive philosophical arguments by more Westernised examiners (as a form of retrodiction), and also in legislation and jurisdiction. Many ordinary South Africans might not even be aware of these scholarly efforts.

Pityana (2017: 143) offers a different explanation. He suggested that the term *ubuntu* as well as what it stands for has become rather nebulous, “a referent for all things that may sound vaguely good”. For many, it has become a distant ideal that makes one feel good but has no real application in the modern world. Its demands could be unbearable and onerous for people to adhere to in current conditions. He (Pityana, 2017: 143-144) quotes Nigerian philosopher, Emmanuel Eze, who declared that *ubuntu* is both “not enough” and “too much”. It is too much, in his opinion, since it relies on the extraordinary such as luck, miracles and an ambiguous concept of human goodness. It is, at the same time, not enough since it fails to supplement or moderate its innate optimism about the goodness of humankind. Eze’s conclusion was that *ubuntu* is deficient because it promises more than it can deliver. It cannot deliver on the moral challenge of moving from what *is* to what *ought* to be. Pityana (2017: 144) himself entertains a slightly different reservation about *ubuntu*, namely that “in pointing to some imaginary past, that does not appear to be grounded in present realities of life, *ubuntu* may be guilty of undermining the challenge of revolt and critical consciousness,” thereby leading to forms of paralysis, atrophy and complacency.

Another explanation for the lack of *ubuntu* morality in South African society is offered by Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013). They contend that although it is worthwhile to adhere to the precepts of *ubuntu* in some circumstances, *ubuntu* could be seen as a romanticised and possibly outdated narrative of return to an unsophisticated parochial past that no longer exists (also see Vervliet, 2009: 30-31). In their opinion, the values contained in *ubuntu* do not sit well with a modern, sophisticated, industrialised and sophisticated way of life. Pityana (2017) finds their explanation also acceptable, stating that modern society arguably may no longer be compliant in terms of *ubuntu* expectations, cultures are more intermingled in our time, and there is a lot more reliance on modern technologies that affect human conduct. For these reasons, *ubuntu* may no longer be as abiding as was once assumed.

There might be yet another explanation for South Africans showing ignorance or a deliberate departure from the precepts of *ubuntu*. Since the advent of democracy in South Africa, there has been an effort on the part of the political and legal authorities, as discussed, at reviving the notion of *ubuntu*. Various conceived, it is seen by these authorities as an expression of an authentic African ethical concept, a way of life, an authentic mode of being African, an individual ideal, the appropriate public spirit, a definition of life itself and the preferred manner of conducting public and private business. Among other public displays of the spirit of *ubuntu*, the South African government, therefore, has deliberately chosen its service delivery mantra and its public slogan as *Batho Pele* (the people first) in order to inspire obeisance to *ubuntu*. The courts, as we have seen, occasionally also resorted to the values of *ubuntu* in their verdicts. It is possible, however, that South African citizens on the ground question such a public, widespread, and concerted “ubuntu-isation” of the intellectual, business, public and private lives. The relatively aggressive promotion of *ubuntu* in post-apartheid South Africa might be regarded by the “ordinary citizen in the street” as a project conceived by those in power and hence not meaningful for all people. An increase in crime might be one of the ways in which they show their discontent with the processes of “ubuntu-isation” of life and business (Matolino & Kwindigwi, 2013: 197).

Yet another explanation for the current condition on the ground is that *ubuntu* has in recent years been conceived as a restorative move aimed at securing the dignity of the black masses as well as an attempt at forging a so-called black identity. This line of reasoning relies on similar historical cases on the continent that sought to aggressively promote an African mode of being, which coincided with both the end of colonialism and the rise of a black upper-class. According to Matolino and Kwindingi (2013: 197) such attempts have so far always ended in public social and political failure. In their opinion, efforts at reviving the *ubuntu* philosophy have been informed by Afrocentric political aims, but these aims might currently be deemed by “ordinary” people to be inappropriate or undesirable given the new (post-traditional) conditions that they now live in and conduct their business in, such as a neoliberal capitalist market environment (in which competition and performatism are rife), globalisation, cosmopolitanism and democracy. As a philosophy, *ubuntu* might have been appropriate and satisfactory in situations when communities were still small and undifferentiated (Matolino & Kwindingi, 2013), but might not be deemed appropriate or applicable in modern communities characterised by high(er) levels of sophistication and differentiation. This explains why, despite the efforts of authors and lawyers to take pains at amplifying the meaning and application potential of the *ubuntu* concept and philosophy, this philosophy has not seemed to find fertile soil in the daily conduct of South Africans.

It is, of course, also possible that the trauma that the South African society has undergone due to apartheid, together with the current corruption and state-capture, might have more explanatory value for the “fractured-ness” of South African society, also for the high crime rate, than only the fading of *ubuntu* values in society.

*Ubuntu* may for all these reasons not be as long-lasting today as assumed by South African legislators and the powers that be. South Africans, as Pityana (2017) observed, are today under the influence of a variety of new/non-traditional African cultural and philosophical presuppositions. A more precise determination of the degree to which *ubuntu* is still alive and well on the ground will require further research in which this problem is disaggregated across different social institutions and assessed with different social scales. Because society is a highly complex entity, *ubuntu* might indeed be tacitly prevalent in working class households, in various configurations of social solidarity and in a range of social interactions. Vervliet’s (2009) observation that progress and change is part and parcel of society ties in with this view. Society cannot be frozen into imagined cultural and historical identities. Meiring (2016) agrees with him in stating that in some circumstances *ubuntu* cannot be seen as a static phenomenon or set of rules. It represents many truths, depending on context; it should not be regarded as a closed system but rather as a history that is open-ended and constitutively dialogical. In her opinion, the ethics of *ubuntu* is based on the view that humans are creators of the truth for themselves and their communities rather than living by a truth “out there”. *Ubuntu* ethics, therefore, is active and continual.

Several of the explanations for the non-adherence to *ubuntu* principles enumerated above seem to be reconcilable with the group stability theory of Lahti and Weinstein (2005), namely that the behaviour of the South African at street level could be ascribed to “adaptive responses to dynamic social environments” and “social influences”. Meiring’s (2016) finding that *ubuntu* should in some circumstances be seen as an open-ended and ongoing discourse and not an absolute and static set of rules, and Vervliet’s (2009) observation that society is subject to constant change, however, are contrary to Lahti and Weinstein’s (2005) group stability theory’s background assumption that people tend to treat moral rules as deserving of absolute

adherence, and that they consider moral rules as absolute in the sense that they carry an implication of permanence across time and space (Lahti & Weinstein, 2005).

This brief overview of the perceived absence of a true *ubuntu* mentality in the lives and conduct of modern-day South Africans does not detract, however, from the fact that *ubuntu* embodies the enduring principle of the common good and of harmonious relations among people, and that South Africans have to strive for, and be educated towards, compliance with this love-principle, which inherently forms the core of *ubuntu*. South Africans cannot evade or ignore the fact that they do exist in community and are indeed bonded by relationships that are part of their identity (Pityana, 2017).

## 8. UBUNTUGOGY AS A POSSIBLE SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM

Although *ubuntu* seems to have been conceived as a social-political tool for the promotion of peaceful society in Southern Africa, its values have of late been viewed in a new light, namely in terms of *ubuntugogy*, that is, education in accordance with the *ubuntu* spirit. As mentioned, the South African Ministry of (Basic) Education effectively created in its *Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy* (RSA, 2001: 1–3) a conceptual bridge between *ubuntu* as basic philosophy of life or life-view, and *ubuntugogy* as a form of pedagogy by affirming the need for the *ubuntu* values of equality, non-racism, non-sexism, openness, reconciliation and respect to be instilled in young people (RSA, 2001: 4). Upcoming generations have to be equipped to know and understand others in order to know and understand themselves and their place – and those of others – in a multicultural environment (RSA, 2001: 14). Lutomia, Sibeyo and Lutomia (2018: 104–106) similarly recognised the pedagogical potential of *ubuntu* in the form of *ubuntugogy*. Although they do not employ the word “ubuntugogy” in their discussion, they note that knowledge, rituals, means of making a living, and meaningful culture-making have through the ages been passed on from generation to generation. Communities that value *ubuntu* precepts have always taught these precepts to the upcoming generations so that the latter could go on to take up their roles in the family and – relevant to the core argument of this paper – their communities and the larger world.

*Ubuntugogy* can take many forms, ranging from idioms and terminology associated with *ubuntu* values in the curriculum and extra-curricular activities. Kafanabo (2019) maintained, for instance, that curriculum designers should take note of what historians have discovered about indigenous ideas and practices before colonialism, such as those relating to personhood and relationships, and integrate them into the curriculum where applicable. A measure such as this, according to Ali (2011: 72), could play “a ... salient role in shaping children’s character development”. Dasen (2011) goes somewhat further than Ali by claiming that *ubuntu* could be regarded as a main goal of education, namely the forming of a complete human being, a person of good character. Magano (2018: 238–241) agrees with this view: *Ubuntu* could be adopted as an overarching philosophy since it forms the basis of cooperation and collaborative environments. It encourages all in a community or group to participate, share and support in a particular activity and promotes virtues of kindness, compassion and concern for others. *Ubuntu* embodies a moral principle that promotes social responsibility and solidarity, the duty of care, the virtues of sensitivity, selflessness and devotion to duty, and a vision of a society based on justice and equality (Pasha & Moichela, 211). The adoption of *ubuntu* as overarching philosophy of education, according to Maunganidze, Kasayira and Mudhovozi (2011), will lead to the creation of a healthy society since it would prepare the young people to enter the moral order of responsible adult life.

The solution to much of the current moral malaise of South African society seems to lie in resorting in a more concerted manner to the pedagogical potential of *ubuntu*gogy, that is, the teaching of the moral order that forms the core of the *ubuntu* ideal. To do so would help the South African society at large to overcome much of the social ills outlined in this paper.

## 9. CONCLUSION

We do not agree with Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013: 198) that “*ubuntu* ought to reach its end”. The view or philosophy of life known as *ubuntu* has found a foothold in the legislation and the jurisprudence as well as in education (in the *Manifesto* and other documents referred to) in South Africa, and has been viewed up to now as a standard for, on the one hand, promoting behaviour and conduct among South Africans that could contribute to the general well-being of all and of the nation in general, and on the other hand, serve as a norm for judging the appropriateness of the conduct of South Africans.

For various reasons the principles contained in the notion of *ubuntu*, particularly as they have been explicated by scholars, theoreticians and judges, seem not (yet) to have found a clear and obvious place in the hearts of “ordinary” South Africans. *Ubuntu* either only exists somewhere in the historical or traditional backgrounds of South Africans and hence has no say in, or impact on daily conduct, or acquaintance with its values and has dissipated through the years. It is, of course, also possible that the lack of *ubuntu* may be ascribed to the fact that South Africa is still in the throes of transition, that South Africans are still in a process of discovering their new national identity.

We agree with those who contend that the *ubuntu* philosophy contains values on which a healthy twenty-first century community spirit and life can be built, and hence that all (South) Africans should exhort their fellow (South) Africans to conduct themselves in alignment with this philosophy of life.

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