

**Ubuntu through Umuntu: Balancing Ecological Justice and Social Justice in Nature
Conservation**

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Summary

As biodiversity is rapidly declining conservationists call for drastic change. Proposals to give a significant share of the earth's surface to nature gain support, despite the social justice concerns they are associated with. Conservationists argue that justice scholars should be more concerned with ecological justice (justice for nature) anyway. They claim that we should prioritise ecological justice over social justice in nature conservation. The ethics of ubuntu offers insights that challenge this claim. In my thesis, I will therefore question: From a relational ubuntu ethics perspective, should we prioritise ecological justice over social justice to avert environmental destruction? In two arguments I will set out why we should not prioritise ecological justice over social justice. First, argue that ubuntu shows that we cannot live in harmony with nature unless we critically reflect on our conception of social and ecological justice to make them compatible. Secondly, I argue following the ubuntu logic that a well-developed sense of social justice combined with engagement with nature allows us to develop a sense of ecological justice, which underlines an important connection between ecological and social justice. These arguments add and give relevance to the social justice concerns about plans to designate significant parts of the earth solely to nature.

1. Introduction

Throughout its lifetime, our earth has endured many hardships. Five times it was struck by mass extinctions. During the most recent mass extinction, approximately 66 million years ago, a meteorite hit the earth and led to the extinction of 75 per cent of all species. After each of these mass extinction events, it took 10 to 30 million years before the life on earth had recovered. To put it in perspective, this recovery time took 40 to 120 longer than the human sapiens have been walking around on earth (Hance, 2015).

If it were not for the fascinating ways in which scientists have reported and made visible the history of the earth, I would consider it unimaginable that these massive extinctions took place on the same earth where I now spend my daily life. Yet, as Williams et al. (2015) suggest, the next massive extinction is on its way. This predicted mass extinction is characterised by the unique circumstance of a single species claiming a big part of the earth's resources. You may guess it: this single species is the human species. Currently, we already see massive biodiversity declines. A 2022 WWF report, for example, gave notice of a 69 per cent wildlife decline between 1970 and 2014.

The extinctions hit both nature and us, so there is reason enough to do something about it. Nevertheless, since the environmental crisis is seen to be rooted in humans' self-interested resource use and ignorance of the value of nature, we should think about whether we should conserve nature for the sake of nature itself or humans' sake. In the article '*Foregrounding ecojustice in conservation*', Washington et al. (2018, p.367) point out that 'debates continue about whether social (i.e. inter-human) justice trumps ecological justice (justice for the nonhuman).' They go on to argue that in conservation, ecological justice should be prioritised over social justice to avert environmental destruction. Philosophically, this would mean that whenever human and nonhuman interests conflict, nonhuman interests count more heavily. In conservation practice, it would imply that plans criticised for harming social justice can still be considered justified if they significantly contribute to the conservation of nature.

In this thesis, I will challenge the claim that we should prioritize ecological justice over social justice from an ubuntu ethics perspective. Ubuntu is considered a relational ethics. Relational ethics includes all views that define 'moral status, right action, or good character as constituted by beneficent ties or other bonds of sharing' (Metz & Clark Miller, 2016, p.1). In ubuntu, this refers to considering oneself as part of a larger whole, experiencing life as

interconnected with others and caring for another's quality of life. Ubuntu gives insights into how we can arrive at both social and ecological justice and how the two should relate to each other. Ubuntu distinguishes itself from many other theories because it recognizes the concept of ecological justice and the intrinsic value of nature while relating it to social justice. This is important in reacting to Washington et al. (2018), who think that our inability to avert the environmental crisis stems from the failure to recognize the intrinsic value of nature.

The main question in this thesis is: From a relational ubuntu ethics perspective, should we prioritise ecological justice over social justice in nature conservation to avert environmental destruction? I will argue that we should not prioritise ecological justice over social justice. Through the ubuntu perspective, it becomes clear that we cannot live in harmony with nature unless we critically reflect on our conception of social and ecological justice to make them compatible. Ubuntu also reveals that a well-developed sense of social justice combined with engagement with nature allows us to develop a sense of ecological justice, underlining the relevance of social justice to ecological justice.

Why is it important to think about this question? The debate about the relative importance of ecological justice and social justice is philosophically relevant because it entails reflection upon humans' moral obligations towards the environment and each other. This asks for the philosophical consideration of the relationship between humans and nonhumans. The debate is also societally relevant because it influences views on how conservation should be conducted. The resulting conservation plans affect not just conservationists and nature but also society as a whole.

One concrete conservation proposal that Washington et al. (2018) suggest we should consider is the half-earth plan. I will refer to this plan throughout my thesis as an example of a policy that prioritizes ecological justice over social justice. The half-earth plan is a conservation proposal initially defended by the biologist Edward O. Wilson (2016). Wilson thinks that considering the magnitude of the biodiversity crisis and the ineffective conservation policies, a different approach is needed. The proposal suggests that to mitigate the ongoing biodiversity crisis and protect the earth's ecosystems, we should set aside half of the planet's surface for conservation purposes. This would involve creating large, interconnected networks of protected areas spanning various habitats and ecosystems.

By protecting half of the earth's surface, the half-earth plan aims to provide sufficient space for a wide range of species to thrive, maintain healthy ecosystems, and ensure the long-term

sustainability of life on earth. The half-earth proposal remains a debated concept, although there is growing support among policymakers for the idea, as evidenced by the establishment of the UN policy target to make 30 per cent of the earth protected nature by 2030 (UN Environment Programme, 2021). Even though it is uncertain whether we will meet this specific goal, the percentage of officially protected land and water surfaces has steadily increased since 1990 (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2023).

Washington et al. (2018) claim that ecological justice should take precedence over social justice could be a crucial aspect in defending the half-earth plan, as Armstrong (2024, Chapter 6) suggests that the plan is socially unjust in various ways. Firstly, the plan's failure to address compensation or support for affected communities raises ethical concerns about potential exploitation. This is especially worrisome because, in conservation practice, the true costs of conservation are often underestimated. Implementing half-earth without considering the fair distribution of conservation burdens could worsen existing inequalities and food insecurity. Critics also argue that the proposal may focus on the symptoms rather than the causes of biodiversity loss, potentially deflecting attention from systemic issues such as capitalism's role in environmental degradation. Additionally, there are concerns about governance structures, democratic participation, and the incorporation of indigenous knowledge in decision-making processes. Lastly, the half-earth plan could limit access to green and blue natural spaces for especially marginalized communities.

Defenders of the half-earth proposal have not argued clearly how the plan would be executed, leaving room for addressing many of the concerns raised. However, in light of other large-scale conservation policies, there is good reason to expect that social justice will not be a top priority. Historically, such policies have often perpetuated colonial legacies of land dispossession and marginalization, portraying indigenous peoples as threats to biodiversity even though the colonizers themselves were often responsible for environmental destruction. Present-day conservation still frequently leads to displacement and neo-colonial practices, with indigenous communities bearing the costs. Despite attempts to rectify past injustices, conservation policies often continue to sideline indigenous and disadvantaged communities (Armstrong, 2024, pp.113-117).

In claiming that ecological justice should take precedence over social justice, Washington et al.'s (2018) article tacitly suggests in assessing proposals like the half-earth plan, we should focus on how it addresses the environmental crisis without being overly hindered by social

justice considerations. Presumably, Washington et al. would want to minimise the harms of the half-earth proposal. However, since the point of the half-earth plan is to make a drastic change in how we relate to nature, it can be expected that even in the best version it will bring along some significant harm to human interests. In this thesis, I am going to offer some additional arguments next to Armstrong's social justice arguments as to why the half-earth plan should be rejected and why we should generally not prioritise ecological justice.

In what follows I will set out two arguments and respond to a critique that applies to both of these arguments. In Chapter 2, I will introduce how and why Washington et al. (2018) contrast social and ecological justice, the broader environmental ethics debate, and some main ideas in ubuntu ethics. In Chapter 3, I will argue that Washington et al.'s (2018) assumption that social and ecological justice can clash, falls short in accounting for the dependence of human well-being on environmental well-being. I will argue through ubuntu that it is important to think of social justice aligning with ecological justice to appreciate the interdependence between humans and nature and the value of nature in this relationship.

In Chapter 4, I will build on the African philosophy of mind in combination with moral psychology to argue that promoting social justice can be a bridge towards the development of a sense of ecological justice. I will explain that empathy is initially developed in the building of just relationships with other humans, but can be further developed to foster harmonious connections with nature. This insight connects to the ubuntu emphasis on empathy as an important quality in our relationships with others. In both Chapters 3 and 4, I will stress that ubuntu attributes purpose to nature. In Chapter 5, I will argue why this can be seen as a reasonable assumption despite the critiques of this metaphysical assumption. I will end with a conclusion in Chapter 6.

2. Social Justice, Ecological Justice and Ubuntu

In this chapter, I will explain some concepts that are relevant to understanding the arguments of my thesis. First, I will explain the concepts of environmental and ecological justice and discuss how they relate to different views on the value of nature. Along the way, I will explain how Washington et al. (2018) place environmental and ecological justice in contrast and why they conclude that ecological justice should be prioritised over social justice. Secondly, I will introduce ubuntu. I will distinguish multiple interpretations of ubuntu and identify and further explain the interpretation that is most relevant to my thesis.

2.1 Social Justice vs. Ecological Justice

Within environmental ethics, there are various debates about how inclusive the moral community should be. The moral community includes all beings who are thought to have intrinsic value. Entities possessing intrinsic value are valuable in and of themselves, regardless of the benefits they provide to humans or other animals. When something has intrinsic value, there is a fundamental reason to conserve it (Armstrong, 2024, p.43). The moral community provides the foundation for principles of justice. The boundaries of the moral community therefore decide how justice is defined and to whom theories of justice apply.

I will now distinct two justice debates within environmental ethics to mark the difference between environmental efforts focused on creating social justice and environmental efforts focused on creating ecological justice. This is important for understanding what it means to prioritize ecological justice over social justice and why this could be seen as important from an environmental ethics perspective. First, there is the environmental justice debate, which concerns the fair and equitable treatment of all people in addressing environmental problems. It draws a connection between safeguarding nature and principles of social justice because the environmental crisis is seen as a cause of social injustice. Action against environmental issues is imperative if we care about social justice. Moreover, when countries or groups try to solve environmental problems, the solutions they devise can exacerbate social injustice or create new injustices, as evidenced in numerous cases where policies meant to save nature have had adverse social effects (Armstrong, 2024, p.14).

However, since interhuman relationships are at the centre of analysis in the debate about environmental justice, this debate is not focused on defending the protection of nature for

nature's sake (White, 2013). Washington et al. (2018) point out that environmental justice is just an extension of social justice, meaning that social justice would still be prioritised when dealing with cases where social and ecological justice conflict. Therefore, they consider the environmental justice debate to be anthropocentric at its core. Anthropocentrism can be defined as the view that only humans have intrinsic moral value. This implies that all other things should be considered as just a means to human ends (Goralnik & Nelson, 2012).

The second justice debate in environmental ethics is the ecological justice debate. When I speak of ecological justice, I refer to the fair treatment of nature out of the idea that nature has intrinsic value. In contrast to the human-focused concept of environmental justice, concern with ecological justice is not mainstream in the academic literature about justice according to Washington et al. (2018)¹. The ecological justice debate places all of nature at the centre of analysis. Nature can be seen to include humans, although we are only one component of a bigger complexity (White, 2013). Nevertheless, Washington et al. (2018) posit that in the most simple definition, ecological justice is the project focused on realizing justice between humans and nature. Thereby they distinguish the debate from debates that only consider justice as a concept to analyse justice among humans.

The debate about ecological justice may be less mainstream in the literature about justice because it presupposes that there are natural entities outside of humans that have intrinsic value, which is a debated issue. There are a few different viewpoints that argue that not only humans belong to the moral community. The viewpoints differ in their take on who should be included and what it is to have intrinsic value but they all draw attention to the relationality or morally relevant similarities between humans and nature and use this as a basis to set themselves off against anthropocentrism.

Biocentrism is described by Goralnik & Nelson (2012) as the view that some or all living individuals should be included in the circle of moral consideration. They put together together the two distinguishable views of zoocentrism and biocentrism. Zoocentrism is the view that some nonhuman individual lives are intrinsically valuable because the traits to which the human intrinsic value is attributed are also found in these individuals (Goralnik & Nelson, 2012). According to Peter Singer (1975), for instance, species membership alone

¹ This is also supported by Baxter (2004, p.6) and Schlosberg (2007, p.6) although none of them refer to a literature review. Also Armstrong(2024, p.18) writes: 'Scholars of global justice ought to be much more concerned than they have sometimes appeared about biodiversity loss'.

should not determine moral worth, but rather the ability to experience pain and pleasure should be the criterion for moral consideration. Biocentrism contends that all individual organisms have moral worth (Goralnik & Nelson, 2012). For example, Paul Taylor's (1986) biocentric argument posits that both humans and nonhuman life are interconnected components of a larger living community, dependent on each other for survival and well-being. Consequently, humans should not be considered more valuable than other life.

The article by Washington et al. (2018) is grounded in ecocentrism, which they define as the view 'in which human and nonhuman organisms, species, ecosystems, and ecosystem processes are all understood to have moral value' (p. 368). Ecocentrism is similar to Paul Taylor's view in the sense that it assigns moral value to all living beings based on the interrelatedness of all beings. Unlike biocentrism, however, ecocentrism assigns moral value to both individuals and wholes like ecosystems. It is a holistic view because it supports the perspective that wholes possess emergent properties not found in their individual parts, resulting in a collective existence that is greater than the mere sum of its components. (Goralnik & Nelson, 2012).

J. Baird Callicott's (1989) land ethic, for example, emphasizes that the ecological whole is the ultimate measure of moral value. He advocates for the protection of the biotic community as a whole even when this asks for individual sacrifices. He argues that the value of individual organisms depends on their ecological function and significance within the ecosystem, suggesting that functionally vital species hold greater value than redundant ones. Additionally, the land ethic acknowledges that death, suffering, and decay are integral parts of the ecological system, challenging zoocentric views.

Washington et al. (2018) also refer to ecosystem processes as part of their moral community. It is unclear to me how and why we should include ecosystem processes. Judging from other works of these authors (e.g. Curry, 2007; Washington et al., 2017; Kopnina et al., 2018) they may mean that we should expand ecocentrism to a universal consideration, in which also non-biotic beings are included as well. This view has been more elaborately defended by Thomas Birch (1993). Birch questions whether we can and should establish a criterion of what is worthy of consideration at all. He posits that everything should be granted moral consideration until proven otherwise because all entities, whether living or non-living, deserve attention and respect due to the importance and necessity of all relationships.

In comparison, while anthropocentrism and zoocentrism attribute moral value to animals and humans based on a feature that is internal to the individual, the other worldviews contend that moral value is based on the relationships between individual beings. Besides, the practical meaning of taking something into moral consideration seems to change the wider the circle of moral consideration gets. While we can derive from all non-anthropocentric worldviews that we have responsibilities to at least some parts of nature, the more narrow worldviews are more pragmatic than the broader worldviews. For example, Taylor notes that the inclusion of all life in the moral community should be seen as an ideal as it is practically unattainable to always treat all life with respect (Taylor, 1986, pp.246-255). Nevertheless, there are ecocentric initiatives like the rights of nature movement Earth Jurisprudence that aim to put the moral treatment of ecosystems into practice (Matthews, 2019).

Washington et al. (2018) note that most debate about justice, even when it concerns environmental problems like in the environmental justice debate, is ultimately about social justice. They argue that the environmental justice debate is not a good starting point to realise ecological justice. What is in the interest of social justice, however, does not necessarily converge with what is in the interest of ecological justice because the fulfilment of people's basic needs may not always be beneficial to the protection of nature. They suggest that if we approach such conflicts from an environmental justice perspective, the protection of other humans will always be prioritised over the protection of nature because justice between humans is central to this perspective and ecological justice only takes a second place. According to Washington et al., this reveals the incomplete recognition of the intrinsic value of nonhuman life.

Especially 'in a world where conflicts between humanity and nature are bound to increase' (Washington et al., 2018, p. 371), ecological justice will not be reached if we prioritise social justice over ecological justice. So they propose that there are two pathways we can take. In the pathway we are on now, we focus on environmental justice, through which we prioritise social justice. In this way, we may work towards fairness between people but it will not necessarily create justice between humans and nature. On the other hand, if we take the pathway focused on ecological justice, we can create justice between humans and nature and eventually, this will also be beneficial to interhuman relationships.

To make their view more concrete, Washington et al. (2018) give an example of what this second pathway could look like. This example is based on the assumption that we take more

than our fair share of nature. They acknowledge that it is arguable what our fair share is but pose that we can agree that we currently take more than our fair share because ‘at least 60% of ecosystem services are now being degraded or used unsustainably’ (p.370). They suggest that biological productivity should be distributed according to some balance in which humans do not degrade the ecosystem services or otherwise degrade them less. On this account, conservation policy should strive after ‘bio-proportionality’, which should be taken to be the creation of a balance in ecosystems that is optimal for most creatures in these ecosystems. The half-earth plan is in line with this ethics of bio-proportionality because it implies that a larger percentage of land and sea area would be dedicated to nature itself. Therefore, they state that ‘if we applied bio-proportionality, it would need an absolute commitment to visions of expanded reserves such as ‘Nature Needs Half’”(p.371)².

The simplest way to reject the article of Washington et al. (2018) would be to reject ecocentrism in the first place. However, the question of whether ecological justice should be prioritised over social justice is only relevant if we suppose that there is such a thing as ecological justice. Therefore, the question presupposes that the moral community includes at least some natural entities. I think it is also not necessary to reject the ecocentric viewpoint to prove Washington et al. (2018) wrong. Therefore I will join them in assuming that all of nature has intrinsic value. I will measure my main question against the insights of ubuntu. As I will further explain in the next section, this philosophy entails a holistic worldview just like ecocentrism. Therefore, I consider it suitable for reacting to my main question, which presupposes the existence of ecological justice.

So I will not reject Washington et al.’s (2018) assumption that nature is in its broadest sense intrinsically valuable. To keep my thesis readable, I will just refer to all these different entities under the collective term nature or natural entities. I do want to point out that conservation practice involves interaction with individual organisms like plants and animals. To conserve is to support the continued existence of something (usually out of the motivation that we value it in some way). Non-living entities like stones, water, and soil will keep existing and the self-evidence of their existence takes away the need to actively conserve them, even though keeping them in a certain state can be important to support the conservation of natural life. So as the general mission of conservation is ‘to promote the continued existence of valuable things in the living world (Luque-Lora, 2023, p.80), I think

² ‘Nature Needs Half’ refers to the half-earth plan

that conservationists' contribution to ecological justice is focused on the living parts of nature. Therefore I will also focus on the living parts of nature.

2.2 Ubuntu

I will now explain some basic ideas behind ubuntu, which perspective I will use to reject the idea that we need to prioritize ecological justice over social justice. Ubuntu is a pan-African philosophy and ethics derived from a collection of related philosophical ideas of the Bantu-speaking Indigenous communities. Ubuntu can be seen as a response to the systematic negation of African philosophy as it attempts to translate the mostly nonliterate African philosophical tradition to academic literature (Ramose, 1999, Chapter 2). The Bantu languages are spoken in Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Malawi. While ubuntu emphasizes that the wisdom found in these countries is comparable and compatible, there are regional differences in content and language. Therefore the reference to ubuntu can lead to misconceptions (Gwaravanda, 2019).

According to Metz (2017), there are six competing interpretations of ubuntu ethics. The first interpretation is focussed on human dignity and contends 'that there is value intrinsic to something about human nature that demands honouring' (p.105). The second interpretation entails the utilitarian understanding that an action is right when it supports the well-being of others. A third interpretation, going under the name of moderate communitarianism, adds to this second interpretation the condition that the action should not violate individuals' rights. A fourth interpretation posits that our actions are right when they reflect positive relating towards others and contribute to our self-realizations as social beings. A fifth interpretation posits that acts are right when they show solidarity with vulnerable groups. Lastly, there is the interpretation that an act is right when it allows one to develop harmonious relationships. After specifying what harmony means in this last interpretation, Metz chooses this interpretation as the best account of ubuntu as it is most in line with important ubuntu intuitions.

I will mostly build on the work of the South African philosopher Mogobe Ramose, to whom Metz (2017) ascribes the fourth interpretation of ubuntu. In contrast to Metz, I think that the sixth interpretation of ubuntu also connects with the work of Ramose as he also underlines the duty to engage in harmonious relationships. Besides, his account of ubuntu is relevant to my thesis because, unlike other accounts of ubuntu, Ramose's account assigns us a responsibility towards nonhumans. As I argued in the last section, this is important because to

take into serious consideration the question of whether ecological justice should be prioritised over social justice we need to presume that we have some kind of moral duty towards nonhumans. Occasionally I will supplement Ramose's view with some additional explanations from other authors who concern themselves with African philosophy.

I will now explain some basic ideas in Ramose's explanation of ubuntu. The word ubuntu suggests the core of its philosophy, although there is no one-on-one English translation. Ramose (1999, pp.35-42) translates ubu as the combination of the verbs being and becoming: being becoming. It encompasses the highest level of generality as it refers to how the universe is in infinite motion as it is always being unfolded and unfolding at the same time. Ntu refers to a critical moment where existence takes on a particular way of being, in the process of unfolding. The dynamic wholeness of ubu can only exist and continue to exist in the notion of ntu because wholeness is always constituted by parts that take their form through continuous interaction. Taking the right form in the process of unfolding would therefore mean relating in such a way to what is around you that you do justice to your position in the wholeness of the universe. In this way, ubuntu is essentially based on a relational ontology and ethics.

Ubuntu is applied to humans in the concept of umuntu. Umuntu refers to humans taking their specific form through their journey towards ethical life as they thereby develop their humaneness. Humans are social animals and therefore we can show our humanness by making use of our social abilities, such as communication, empathy, and respect in our engagement with others. These qualities are seen as valuable aspects of our human nature. We develop these qualities by seeing the humanness in others. This is expressed in the aphorism, 'umuntu ngumuntu nga bantu', meaning that we become persons through interacting humanely with others. As Ramose (1999) explains: 'to be a human be-ing is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish humane relations with them' (p.37).

The specific reference to umuntu in the case of humans, suggests that for nonhuman life other duties count. Yet, all life should eventually contribute to the wholeness of ubu by taking the right form in and through their engagement with others. In this way, ubuntu steers towards harmony between all beings (Ramose, 1999, pp.105-106). The search for harmonious relationships is about finding an optimal balance between the well-being of individuals and ecosystems at large and forms the basis of the African conception of justice (Mwesi, 2019).

The more specific parts that constitute universal wholeness are intrinsically valuable as a part of this wholeness. The massive, human-instigated species extinctions are, for instance, considered morally wrong as they violate the intrinsic value of these species as part of the larger whole (Kelbessa, 2022).

Ubuntu focuses on our character as a moral agent within a larger whole. To describe how ecocentrists think of nature, I referred to the idea of the circle of moral consideration. Like ecocentrism, ubuntu ascribes to the widest circle of moral consideration, contributing intrinsic value to all of nature. However, ubuntu adds a hierarchy within this circle.

According to ubuntu, treating others with compassion helps develop moral character. This means not every human is automatically considered morally developed, but being human is a prerequisite for potential growth as a moral person. Still, entities lacking the ability to develop themselves as moral persons are not solely seen as instrumental. All parts of the universe are valued intrinsically and should be treated humanely (Molefe, 2020).

2.3 Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I first introduced the debate on environmental ethics and how the argument of Washington et al. (2018) relates to this debate. Within environmental ethics, justice is approached in two ways: the environmental justice approach focuses on restoring social justice in the context of environmental issues and the ecological justice approach extends moral consideration to nature, recognizing the need to treat nature fairly. Washington et al. (2018) are convinced that social justice is often prioritised over ecological justice whenever there is a conflict between the two and argue that we now need to do the opposite to avert the environmental crisis. Secondly, I introduced ubuntu, the perspective on which I will base my arguments. Ubuntu is a holistic worldview and supports as a main imperative that we should engage in caring relationships with others. Having explained the most important concepts and their place within the environmental ethics debate, I will now move on to my first argument.

3. Interdependence of Humans and Nature

The claim that ecological justice should be prioritised over social justice implies that there is at least some opposition between the two types of justice. In other words, it presumes that social and ecological justice can conflict. In this chapter, I will argue that ubuntu suggests that the interdependent relationship between humans and nature means that the interests of humans and nature are always connected. If we want to create harmony between humans and nature, we should critically reflect upon apparent conflicts between the interests of humans and nature to see how we can resolve them. First, I will establish how social justice is central to ubuntu. Secondly, I will explain how care for nature follows from the ubuntu take on social justice. Then, I will explain the ubuntu argument of why nature is valuable in itself besides being instrumentally valuable. I will use these insights to show that an account of social justice in which it can conflict with ecological justice can undermine efforts towards harmony between humans and nature. This will lead me to conclude that Washington et al.'s (2018) conception of social justice falls short in accounting for the dependency of human well-being on environmental well-being.

3.1 Social Justice through Ubuntu

Social justice is an important element of ubuntu ethics. This is reflected in the central idea that we should develop ourselves as humans through engaging in caring relationships with others. Ramose (1999) briefly mentions that these relationships involve 'a humane, respectful, and polite attitude' and are essentially aimed towards harmony (p.37). Metz (2017) works out what it could mean to build such relationships with other people. He contends that it requires that one identifies and shows solidarity with the other. This involves that one has an attitude of unity and willingness to aid and that one shows cooperative and helpful behaviour. These qualities all seem supportive of social justice.

Metz (2017) elaborates on this that 'the actions are not merely those likely to be beneficial – that is, to improve the other's state – but also are ones done consequent to certain motives, say, for the sake of making the other better off or even a better person' (p. 177). Hereby he points out that in the interest of social justice, we should also help other people in their attempts to live an ethical life. It makes sense that caring for other people entails helping them lead an ethical life if we take into account that ubuntu supports that living an ethical life allows people to grow and live up to their full potential.

Within ubuntu's account of social justice, intergenerational justice is included. This rests on the metaphysical claim that the moral community is not only composed of the people who are presently alive but also of the 'living dead' (past generations) and the 'yet-to-be-born' (future generations). The past, current, and future generations form the three legs of the universal moral community. Although the past and future generations are not embodied, they are part of the universal wholeness. We need to cherish the positive legacy of the past generation and create a positive legacy of our own for the future generation. The responsibility lies with the present generation to ensure the continuity of life by making sure the yet-to-be-born will indeed be born and will be born in a world that supports their well-being (Ramose, 1999, pp.45-46).

Comparing the Ubuntu Notion and Western Notions of Social Justice

I will now explain how ubuntu distinguishes itself from two important Western conceptions of social justice as they are described in Chachine (2008, Chapter 3). Firstly, there is the liberal conception, of which Robert Nozick's (1974) libertarian entitlement theory and John Rawl's (1971) egalitarian theory of justice are examples. These liberal theories ground moral status in the intrinsic characteristics of individuals, and stress the importance of the protection of individual rights and autonomy. Secondly, there is the communitarian conception, which is represented in Alasdair MacIntyre's (1988) and Charles Taylor's (1985) formulation of social justice. Communitarians emphasise that our communities and social connections are the foundation of our identity. They contend that this understanding of human nature should guide our ethical and political evaluations and the design of policies and institutions. Justice is about our duty to uphold and foster the communities that give significance and guidance to our lives (Chachine, 2008).

Metz (2020) explains that the ubuntu conception of social justice is distinguished from the Western conceptions because it has a relational focus. Unlike liberal theories, ubuntu does not assign value based on intrinsic qualities, and unlike communitarianism, it does not solely value entities based on group membership, viewing individuals as entirely shaped by their social environment. In ubuntu, an entity's moral worth stems from its capacity to engage with others, which is constituted by both an intrinsic and external aspect of the individual's life. This recognizes our reliance on social connections without diminishing the importance of social interactions among individuals. In this way, the object of justice is both individuals and communities. Therefore, ubuntu positions itself between the liberal and communitarian conceptions of justice. As I will further argue throughout this chapter, the focus on

relationality has important implications for how we should understand social justice in the context of ubuntu.

3.2 Ecological Justice through Social Justice

I will now explain how ecological justice follows from the ubuntu account of social justice. As stated in Chapter 2, ubuntu posits that everything in this universe forms a wholeness constituted by more specific parts that interrelate and interdepend across different levels. For example, organisms on the ecosystem level are interconnected and on a larger scale, ecosystems amongst each other are also interconnected. So in many ways, parts of the universe form a dynamic wholeness. There is not a creature in this universe that is fully independent and therefore being part of the wholeness is a condition for existence.

Humans are also part of this wholeness. In this way, human well-being is connected to and dependent on the well-being of nature. As Mwesi (2019, p.193) writes: ‘No species in nature, whether human or nonhuman, no matter how developed the intellect, can survive on its own without the contribution of other species to its wellbeing and sustainability’. If humans are ignorant of the well-being of nonhuman life, human societies struggle to survive and thrive. Consequently, if we interact with nonhuman life in a disharmonious way, this also restrains our care for other people (Ramose, 1999, p.106).

We should interact harmoniously with nature even if the effects of our actions are not noticeable in our direct community. Despite geographical and temporal distances, we are still morally responsible because we all belong to the constantly evolving universal wholeness. So, through the interconnectedness between humans and nature, we always affect other people negatively to some extent when we live in a significantly unsustainable way. From the ubuntu social justice perspective, we should harmoniously engage with nonhuman life.

Up until this point, the ubuntu argument seems in line with the convergence theory that was developed by Norton (1997). The convergence theory posits that in practice, policy that is in the interest of protecting humans is in line with policy that is in the interest of protecting nature. Social justice thus gives reason to protect nature and realise harmony between humans and nature. So according to the convergence theory, we can arrive at environmental policy goals through the fulfilment of social justice goals, suggesting we do not need to commit to ecocentrism to push environmental efforts.

However, Washington et al. (2018) suggest that Norton defends the right goals for the wrong reasons. They believe that nature has intrinsic value and that nature's intrinsic value should give reason to conserve nature. When an entity has intrinsic value, we should care for it regardless of its utility to you. It is not enough if you treat that entity well because it benefits you. This motivation would only require us to do the bare minimum when it comes to caring for the other. We only need the entity to be well enough to provide the services we benefit from, but it is not about caring for the other because it deserves to be well. In this way, you would only acknowledge the entity's instrumental value but not the intrinsic value. The convergence theory only stresses the instrumental value of nature, and therefore it relies on anthropocentrism. We cannot arrive at ecological justice through social justice in the way Norton proposes because to arrive at ecological justice, our actions would have to be motivated by the conviction that nature has intrinsic value.

However, while Norton implies that to achieve social justice, we should work on solutions to environmental problems and create harmony between humans and nature, ubuntu suggests that we should *engage* harmoniously with nature. In the case of the convergence theory, our actions are ultimately driven by human interests, while engaging harmoniously with another means that you take a sincere interest in this other. This requires that we attach intrinsic value to the other. The difference between these two duties becomes more clear when we take a closer look at how humans and nature are seen to relate in ubuntu.

As Chemhuru (2019) writes, it is helpful to explain the ubuntu's view on the relation between humans and nature through the concept of telos. Telos refers to the idea that everything in the universe has a purpose or goal towards which it naturally tends. Understanding this telos and striving towards it is essential for realizing one's potential and achieving a fulfilling and flourishing life. While teleology is often linked to Aristotelian philosophy, Chemhuru also places it within the context of African philosophies.

According to Lear's (1988) interpretation of the work of Aristotle, teleology is central to his philosophical framework. In his study of nature, Aristotle (1984, 194a28-33) adopts the notion that all natural objects and processes have inherent purposes or functions. Lear (Chapter 2) poses that teleology helps Aristotle explain the order and regularity observed in the natural world, as each entity strives towards its telos. Teleology also informs Aristotle's ethical theory, particularly his concept of eudaimonia, or the good life, which he contends is our telos (Aristotle, 1984, 195a15-26). Ethics is teleological by nature, as it is concerned with

identifying and pursuing the highest good or end for human beings (Aristotle, 1984, 1097b22-1098a20).

The Aristotelian understanding of telos and the sub-Saharan African perspective share a fundamental similarity: they both connect existence with purpose and the pursuit of a fulfilling life. This ultimately speaks from the word ubuntu, as Ramose (1999) described it, which refers to the more specific parts of the universal wholeness taking their form within this wholeness. Something that exists within and constitutes a bigger wholeness has both its own purpose and a purpose within the bigger wholeness. As ultimate value lies within this wholeness, the purpose of all its specific parts is to develop themselves in such a way that they sustain the wholeness.

On the one hand, teleology connects to ubuntu's holistic metaphysical claim that there is a universal wholeness in which every specific part is interconnected and develops towards the goal of taking the right form within the wholeness. On the other hand, there are normative implications. For humans, this is that we should strive after humanness. Since all the separate parts of the universe are interconnected and together form a harmonious wholeness if all parts live up to their function, we can say that their ultimate life goals are also connected. This means that their telos are connected. Thus, all existence has a telos and has a fundamental teleological connection to each other.

This supports, first of all, that nonhuman lives have a purpose of their own and are therefore ends in themselves. They have intrinsic value and should be morally considered. Second of all, it supports that humans and nature are not just connected without any meaning, but they are fundamentally connected as they both exist within and constitute the same wholeness. As telos is connected to the good life, the teleological connection between humans and nature implies that there cannot be an opposition between the purpose of humans and the purpose of nature. As part of fulfilling our potential, we should help nature towards well-being and as part of nature fulfilling its potential, it supports the well-being of humans (Chemhuru, 2019).

Important to note is that although many African philosophers draw a link between ontology and ethics, it is controversial within the Western philosophical tradition to ground normative claims about what we *ought* to do in ontological claims about what *is*. Gädeke (2020) explains that philosophers are cautious of the naturalistic fallacy, an error in reasoning that occurs when you attempt to derive moral conclusions solely from natural facts. Just because something is a certain way in nature, does not necessarily mean it is morally good. Besides,

ontological claims are seen as more contested than normative ones, making it more challenging to find agreement on normative claims that are based on ontology. However, ontology imposes constraints on the types of normative theories we can reasonably support. Considering a relational ontology in normative theory involves even more than just acknowledging the boundaries of human action. It also requires embracing a specific type of normative theory that aligns with our understanding of our nature. So while relational ontology does not prescribe specific normative principles, it does specifically defend an approach to normative thinking that emphasizes relationships. Therefore, I consider it reasonable to say that the idea of humans and nature being teleologically connected follows from the ubuntu relational ontology.

To come back to the comparison between Norton's (1997) convergence theory and ubuntu, this comparison does not do justice to ubuntu because the convergence theory is anthropocentric and ubuntu is not. In ubuntu philosophy, both humans and nature possess instrumental and as well as intrinsic value, as they are seen as ends in themselves with distinct purposes that are interconnected. Thus, actions aligned with one's purpose benefit both humans and the natural world, emphasizing the symbiotic relationship between them. While the intrinsic value has important ethical consequences, the instrumental value is just a factual consequence of our lives and life purposes being connected.

3.3 Connecting the Well-being of Humans and Nature

Why would it be reasonable to believe in the idea that humans and nature each have a telos and that their telos are aligned with each other? This is a controversial topic, certainly in the field of biology. Biologists often write about nature as if it has a telos. Still, the teleological view is not widespread among biologists (Allen & Neal, 2020). In chapter 5, I will go into this discussion in more detail. For now, I would like to emphasize that there are at least important hints suggesting that there is a positive relation between what is good for humans and what is good for nature. This is not a one-on-one relationship in the sense that everything that gives us short-term pleasure also contributes to the flourishing of nature, but should be seen from a more holistic point of view.

What is most often stressed when pointing at human's relationship with nature is that we need nature to survive. Nature provides services that directly contribute to human well-being. These services include clean air and water, pollination of crops, decomposition of organic matter, regulation of climate, and nutrient cycling. Ensuring the well-being of the ecosystems

that supply these ecosystem services therefore ensures the means to live an adequate life. However, our relationship with nature offers us more than mere survival. As Armstrong (2024, p.37) argues, a healthy nature is an important constituent of our flourishing in life. Empirical research has established that access to healthy terrestrial and marine ecosystems results in various mental and physical health benefits. Environmental destruction, on the other hand, is harmful to our overall health and well-being (e.g. Britton, 2018; WHO & CBD, 2015).

Various ethical perspectives on well-being affirm the positive relationship between human flourishing and nature flourishing as well. Armstrong (2024, p.37) poses that a defender of objective list accounts of well-being would argue that certain elements, such as living in a secure and diverse environment, are crucial for everyone's well-being. Similarly, capabilities theorist Martha Nussbaum (2023, pp.117,118) addresses the importance of access to a diverse and healthy living world as a fundamental capability for all individuals. Moreover, Moellendorf (2014, pp.49-53) argues that the experience of beauty constitutes a flourishing life, including beauty in the natural world like the aesthetic features of organisms and intricate ecosystems like forests and coral reefs. Additionally, Holmes Rolston III notes (2012, p.49) that life would be impoverished without the experience of natural beauty, suggesting that unequal access to biodiversity can constitute an injustice.

Additionally, there are some insights from the current biodiversity crisis that point out how environmental destruction can impoverish human lives. As the environmental crisis leads to intergenerational injustices, it can bring people to the position where it becomes morally questionable to have children. To the extent that it is reasonable to suggest that a fulfilling life involves having the chance to raise children, we can say that the environmental crisis impedes human flourishing when people are held back from having children (Gheaus, 2019). More directly, people's lives can be impoverished by environmental destruction because they have established meaningful relationships with specific parts of the natural world. People can feel like harm to these parts of the environment also harms themselves. As Armstrong (2024) puts it: 'The degradation or destruction of some species, populations, or ecosystems can represent a significant harm to the members of specific communities, thwarting their ability to maintain projects that matter deeply to them' (p.39).

If the telos of humans and nature are truly interconnected, nature's flourishing would also have to depend on the flourishing of humans. There is various empirical evidence indicating

that there is at least a positive relationship between biodiversity loss and distributive inequality (e.g. Hamann et al., 2018; Holland et al., 2009; Mikkelsen et al., 2017) Besides, the review of Oldekop et al. (2015) showed that conservation projects that simultaneously support human well-being by sustainably supplying resources, generally have more positive outcomes than projects that disallow the use of any resources in the area. Conservation goals within projects are achieved more often when these projects empower local communities, enhance cultural advantages, and reduce livelihood expenses. Socioeconomic outcomes are even more reliable predictors of conservation results compared to the physical and management factors of conservation projects. The researchers suggest that our attention to the physical and management aspects of conservation projects should not be at the expense of the socio-economic outcomes. Armstrong (2024, p.23) also concludes that social injustice is a wider structural cause of the environmental crisis and that ‘we should resist any claim that projects of conservation and global justice ought to be pursued separately or in isolation.’

These researches do not exclude that there can be a conflict between what supports human well-being and what supports the well-being of nature. In many ways, humans and nature can be seen to have competing interests and priorities. For example, the enclosure of a natural area can undeniably have positive consequences for the well-being of the ecosystem, while at the same time bringing about burdens to the people who are displaced or denied access. To add, Taylor (1986, p.256) sums up a few apparent conflicts between what supports human well-being and what supports the well-being of nature like replacing a piece of nature with housing, removing a part of a mountain during mining, or ploughing an agricultural field. These examples are all harmful to nature and beneficial to humans. So what should we think of apparent conflicts like these?

The environmental crisis teaches us that we should examine more critically what it is for humans and nature to flourish. Things that seem to be in our interests, might not be in our interest at all if we look at the bigger picture. As we need to adapt our ideas and intuitions to these insights, confusion may occur. While we became aware of the environmental crisis only quite recently, philosophical discussions about well-being can be traced back to ancient times and so a pitfall of prominent conceptions of well-being can be that they do not take into account the insights that the environmental crisis brings us. What makes it even more confusing is that for people living a heavily polluting lifestyle, it can be hard to imagine how they can flourish in life without being burdensome to nature. As several scholars suggest, the synthesis between sustainability and human well-being has not yet been sufficiently

established within important academic fields that report and deliberate on well-being like sociology, social policy, psychology, and philosophy (e.g. Helne, 2021; Kjell, 2011; O'Mahony, 2021). Nevertheless, if we want to think that it is good that people are on earth and that we belong here, we cannot commit to conceptions of well-being that eventually guide us to human suffering and possibly even extinction.

A basic assumption in the prominent theory of justice of Rawls (1971) is that everyone always wants more rather than less of what he calls 'primary goods'. He explains (p.79) that having more primary goods typically ensures greater success in achieving rational goals, whatever those goals may be. Rawls considers the primary goods to be rights and liberties, opportunities, income, and wealth and writes that people (p.348) 'prefer a wider to a narrower liberty and opportunity, and a greater rather than a smaller share of wealth and income.' He adds: 'That these things are good seems clear enough.' However, I think that the assumptions that everyone wants more rather than less and that every rational desire is in line with what is good for us are more controversial than Rawls thinks.

As Gamrbel & Cafaro (2009) point out, abundance does not reassure well-being and it is rather simplicity that enables justice. Although not denying that material goals can have value in our lives, they defend simplicity as a virtue that promotes human well-being and the well-being of nature. By referring to different studies, Gamrbel & Cafaro show that by simplifying our lives and reducing consumption, we can improve human well-being in multiple ways. Besides, simplicity fosters self-awareness, ecological knowledge, and a deeper sense of meaning in life. Moreover, it promotes environmental sustainability by reducing overconsumption and preserving nature for future generations. Through contemplation, we can uncover our deeper, more meaningful interests and identify that although some goals are rational they might be unworthy, misguided, or insignificant. This process of choosing important needs over less important needs enables us to pursue our objectives more effectively while minimizing waste and harm to others. When it comes to the primary good of liberty they note (p.98): 'Full human freedom includes the ability to see and set limits to our pursuit of material goods.'

Moving back to the apparent conflicts, I think we should indeed reflect more critically on what is truly in the interest of nature and people. We should especially reflect on what it is to be well together to come closer to the ideal of living together in harmony. Surely things like housing, food and other resources are important to human well-being but to what degree of

abundance we need them is something we can be more critical of. Regarding the conflict between how the enclosure of nature benefits nature and burdens people, we can question if it is in the long term truly beneficial for nature if we deny people access to natural areas. It would be more beneficial if more and more people started to see how their well-being depends on them being in contact with nature. Instead of isolating nature from human interaction, promoting an appreciation for the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world may lead to a more harmonious and mutually beneficial relationship for both. I will further discuss this in Chapter 4.

3.4 Half-Earth and Prioritising Ecological Justice

Having established the connection between human well-being and the well-being of nature, we can question the assumption of Washington et al. (2018) that social and ecological justice can clash. If social justice is about engaging humanely with other people and if this can be reached by helping others fulfil their potential in life, this means that social justice is about helping other people live up to their telos. If people are teleologically connected to nature, then helping other people to live up to their telos cannot come at the cost of nature.

As mentioned, ubuntu considers nature to be intrinsically valuable besides being instrumentally valuable. We can even say that nature has intrinsic value on the condition of its instrumental value because all beings get their value from being part of the web of relations that forms universal wholeness. In defending that from a social justice perspective, we should engage harmoniously with nature, ubuntu does not bring forth an anthropocentric argument to protect nature. Instead, it defends ecological justice through social justice because social and ecological justice are seen to support each other. The need to prioritise ecological justice over social justice thus falls away.

On this basis, we may question the consistency of the argument of Washington et al. (2018). On the one hand, they point out the moral importance of the interrelatedness of all beings. Chemhuru (2019) suggests that for this interrelatedness to be morally relevant, it must involve a teleological aspect because this would imply that there is a meaningful relationship beyond mere instrumental considerations. A teleological interrelatedness suggests that both humans and nature have inherent purposes and that they have ethical obligations toward each other that arise from our shared flourishing. On the other hand, Washinton et al. (2018) reject the social justice argument that we should care about nature because we are so much related to nature. To argue for the moral relevance of ecological justice they emphasize the

interrelatedness between all beings but to argue against social justice they downgrade this interrelatedness by posing that the interests of humans and nature can conflict. So their account of ecological justice ascribes the teleological interrelatedness between humans and nature, while their account of social justice questions this.

An account of social justice in which social justice can conflict with ecological justice does not support the ecocentric argument. If we are not teleologically connected to nature, this would mean that we are not fully morally connected to nature. Therefore, it is contradictory to pose that nature has intrinsic value and humans have intrinsic value, but in our actions, we cannot always live up to both of these intrinsic values. In this view, value is disintegrated, which goes against the holistic notion that value is interconnected and inseparable.

A proposal like the half-earth plan, which aims to separate people from nature and is also expected to cause social injustices would from the ubuntu perspective not contribute to restoring harmony between humans and nature. Half-earth defenders resign themselves to the idea that the interests of humans and nature are to some extent incompatible and that we cannot live in harmony with nature unless we disengage from it. Nevertheless, ubuntu suggests that to live in harmony with nature we have to engage with it to find out what it is to live well together. Pointing at the apparent conflicts between the interests of humans and nature distracts from being critical of our notion of what is truly in our interest and the interest of nature.

3.5 Chapter Conclusion

The claim that ecological justice should take precedence over social justice suggests that social and ecological justice can clash. Ubuntu prescribes the duty to engage in caring relationships with both people and nature. People and nature are seen to be teleologically interconnected, meaning that what is in the interest of humans is intricately connected to what is in the interest of nature. The duties of care that humans and nature have toward each other are based on this teleological connection. The interdependence between humans and nature therefore implies that both social justice and ecological justice are about what it is to live well with each other. If we want to live in harmony with nature, we need to critically reflect on our conceptions of social and ecological justice to make them compatible. I critiqued the half-earth plan for aiming to separate humans from nature because engagement rather than disengagement is essential for harmony.

4. The Moral Psychology of Ecological Justice

In this chapter, I will argue that social justice enables ecological justice because in getting a sense of social justice we develop social abilities that are essential for developing a sense of ecological justice. Promoting the ubuntu conception of social justice furthers the case of ecological justice because empathy, which is crucial for developing just human relationships, can also foster harmonious connections with nature. Or as Giddy (2019) puts it: ‘Empathy with other persons, central to the ubuntu interpretation of being human, allows for a transformation of mentality that appreciates the value of our shared natural milieu’ (p.48).

I will first set out that moral psychological development is required to arrive at justice. Secondly, I will discuss how empathy guides moral psychological development and is simultaneously trained as one develops morally. Thirdly, I will argue that a well-developed empathic ability can encourage people to treat nonhuman life more justly. Finally, I will discuss the implications of the chapter's insights for the need to prioritize ecological justice and the half-earth plan.

4.1 Moral Psychology and Justice

The African conception of justice is about applying moral principles in our interaction with others in such a way that we can live together harmoniously (Mwesi, 2019). So, acting justly implies that we have a well-developed sense of morality that guides us to bring ethics into practice. In this account of justice, our moral psychology is differentiated from ethics. Moral psychology is about what we personally *perceive* to be right, resulting from the psychological ability to have moral thoughts. Since people are generally no moral saints, our moral psychology is to some extent flawed. Ethics, on the other hand, is what *is* right to do.

This distinction between moral psychology and ethics is in line with the ubuntu idea that we need to relate to others to grow as a human because it brings us closer to wholeness, which encompasses all value. When we engage with other people, we get into dialogue with their perspectives. These other perspectives enrich our sense of morality. As a result, we can come closer to the moral truth and therefore we can act more justly.

I will further explain how this works from a moral psychology perspective, building on the insights from two chapters by Patrick Giddy. Giddy sketches out a philosophy of mind in support of the ubuntu idea that humane engagement with others leads to personal growth. Central to Giddy’s work is the influence of Bernard Lonergan, especially his 1970 book

Insight: A Study of Human Understanding. Lonergan studied human understanding through philosophy, but his explanation of different kinds of thinking, which Giddy draws upon, is consistent with the contemporary models of cognition defended by Kahneman & Sunstein (2005) and Greene & Haidt (2002).

4.2 Moral Psychology, Justice and Empathy

Giddy (2023) explains two ways in which the human brain patterns experiences. One brain pattern leads to subjective experience. Through this brain pattern, we register our sensory observations. In response to these subjective experiences, we form judgements that are reasonable to us personally. A simple example would be that when we touch a hot pan with our bare hands, our subjective judgement is that we should drop it. This is a reasonable judgement from our personal point of view because it allows us to avoid and limit a factor that is harmful to our well-being. The perspectives of others do not play a direct role in how such a judgement is formed, it is only based on our individual subjective experience.

A second brain pattern leads to reflective thinking, which emerges as we acquire language. Through language, we develop self-awareness, enabling us to articulate and share our subjective experiences and judgments with other people. Language allows us to engage with the world symbolically rather than solely through direct interaction. Through this symbolic experience of the world, we can think about things that do not directly present themselves to us by imagining them. When others communicate about their subjective experiences and judgements, we can think along with their experiences and judgements as if they are our own. In thinking along with the experiences and judgements of others, we can look at our own perspective from a distance and have a mediated experience of the world. This allows us to critically reflect upon the accuracy of our subjective judgements. When comparing the two perspectives, we deliberate what a reasonable judgment is (Giddy, 2023). So our reflective thinking exists in the notion of our dialogic way of engaging with others.

This second pattern of reflective thinking is at the heart of moral psychological development. When we consider the experiences of others, we can see our initial judgement in a different light. The other's perspective may reveal potential inaccuracies of one's initial judgement. Comparing the two perspectives, we may come back to our initial judgement and adjust it. Considering multiple perspectives, therefore allows us to sharpen our moral reasoning. Consequently, it can enrich our moral judgment (Giddy, 2019).

What appears to be a crucial factor in reflective thinking and thus in the development of our moral psychological thinking is our ability to consider and imagine others' subjective experiences, in other words, our ability to empathise (Giddy, 2019). Empathy is the capacity to put yourself in someone else's point of view and react to the other with care based on a consideration of the other's perspective. Empathy is the driving force behind caring engagement, which constitutes an ethical life according to ubuntu. So if empathic engagement leads you to an ethical life, it follows that the moral psychology that results from the optimal use of our empathy is well-developed and can guide us in acting justly.

4.3 The Development of Empathy

Empathy is a feature that belongs to us as social animals. The ability to empathise already appears in babies who are just born, showing from their responsiveness to the crying of other babies. Although babies already feel empathic distress, they do not have the cognitive capability yet to realize that it is someone else's pain. In growing up we become self-aware and learn to turn this feeling of empathetic distress into an empathetic response (Hoffman, 2000, Chapter 3).

Through self-awareness, we learn to differentiate between others' experiences and our own. We also learn to grasp how emotions are communicated and how they are influenced by various circumstances. These are cognitive capacities that improve with experience. While children generally miss details when empathizing with others, we develop more eye for detail when maturing (Hoffman, 2000, p.64, 97). As individuals engage in social interactions and are confronted with questions of social justice, they gradually refine their empathetic responses, ultimately leading to a more nuanced understanding and consideration of others' experiences. So, empathy is both a prerequisite of moral understanding and develops alongside moral understanding. For us to get to recognize what is socially just and treat others justly, therefore presumes that we have established a refined ability to empathise with others. In promoting social justice, we also promote the development of people's ability to empathise with others and vice versa.

You may wonder what need there is for empathy in society. After all, we live in societies in which a certain basis of morality is guarded by institutions that establish laws and regulations to govern our interactions with each other and with nature. It would be most effective to design these rules and regulations in a manner that incentivizes people to safeguard the interests of nature and others, thereby eliminating the need for them to rely on empathy.

Kagan (1991), for instance, emphasizes the unreliability of intrinsic moral motivations and advocates for moral rules and institutions as more effective tools for stimulating moral behaviour by offering clear guidelines and incentives. Also, Rawls (1971) argues for the importance of designing laws and regulations to regulate justice.

I agree that institutions indeed regulate justice most effectively. Nevertheless, there are good reasons why empathy is still an important and necessary quality. Incentives may not always be sufficient to ensure compliance with rules and laws. As Hoffman (1989) argues, empathy fosters an understanding of how actions impact others, motivating adherence to moral principles even in the absence of sufficient laws. To illustrate, Hoffman highlights how empathy would encourage people to adhere to moral frameworks like Rawls' (1971) theory of justice. So empathy helps people adhere to rules also when rules fall short or fail to address specific circumstances

Moreover, empathy contributes to the moral development of individuals within society. It helps cultivate a sense of responsibility and care for others and the environment beyond mere compliance with rules. Without empathy, there is a risk of promoting a culture of self-interest and indifference to the well-being of others. Through this sense of responsibility, people are also stimulated to design and support laws of care for other people and the environment in the first place. Hoffman (2014, pp.95-96) explains how empathy contributed to important changes in society like 'emancipating slaves, desegregation, civil rights, and abortion laws'. He concludes (p. 96) that empathy is 'the bedrock of morality, the glue of society, and an important factor in changing laws and society in a prosocial and pro-justice direction'.

4.4 Empathy for Nature

Empathy is not only about being affected by the other but also about letting yourself be affected by the other. Hoffman (2000, p.93) describes how we can also control and correct our empathic response through reflective thinking. This has to do with how we think of the other which causes empathetic distress in us. When we reason about what attributes our feeling of empathetic distress, we can lessen or neutralise our empathetic distress or change it into different empathic feelings such as empathetic anger. For example, if something bad happens to someone who has previously done something bad to us before, we may think low of this person and decrease our feeling of empathy. In this situation, we may be indifferent to the subjective experience of the other.

On the other hand, Giddy (2019) proposes that we can also extend our feeling of empathy to beings we may not self-evidently feel empathy for. The requirement is that we can somewhat imagine what it is like to be this other being. As described in Chapter 3, ubuntu supports that natural entities have their own life purpose. If we know the life purpose of another natural entity and we have studied how it senses and reacts to stimuli, we can start to imagine what stimuli benefit or hamper the purpose of this being. Although nonhuman natural entities work in very different ways than we do, attributing a purpose to the lives of nonhumans creates a point of reference through which we can decide what would be good or bad to do, taking the other natural entity into account.

Surely nonhuman life is in many ways incomparable to humans, which stands in the way of us getting any true understanding of what it is like to be a nonhuman other. Nevertheless, we do not require a direct understanding of what it is like to be something to empathize with it. Empathy in the most basic sense is about recognizing what contributes to the other's well-being based on the other's characteristics, and circumstances. All we need to apply empathy is an understanding of what is good or bad for something, understood in terms of its telos. Thereby we can also take natural entities up in our circle of moral consideration and make what is good to them part of our moral reasoning, allowing us to develop a sense of ecological justice.

Ramose (1999) himself does not specifically go into detail about empathizing with nature. He does mention that we should care for nature and establish a harmonious relationship with it and that to be able to establish this harmonious relationship, we should not only consider our own experience but be curious about all the motions in the universe. He underlines the importance of 'mutual care and sharing, not only between and among human beings but also between the latter and physical nature' and adds, 'Underlying this [...] is the idea that looking at the universe from a de-centred self's point of view is the most realistic orientation to life as a wholeness' (p.109). As we consider other perspectives, we shift away from self-centred thinking and become more attuned to what is good for others, helping us to establish harmonious relationships. Since empathy is crucial for this, I think Ramose's thoughts connect well with the argument I have thus far laid out.

4.5 Putting it into Practice

While thinking along with what is good for other people can already be challenging sometimes, thinking along with what is good for natural entities seems even harder. This is

something we can further explore but only if we take seriously that there is purpose behind the lives of natural entities. For example, in the book *When Species Meet* Donna Haraway (2008) investigates the complex intersections and relationships between humans and other species and aims to redefine how we think of our living together. Taking the relationship with her dog as an example, she argues that by engaging with animals as a subject, we make room for other animals as a subject (p.220). Another example is the book *Matters of Care* by Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), in which she challenges traditional notions of care as exclusively human-centred and instead proposes a more expansive understanding that includes care for natural entities. She suggests (p.197) that we can explore our empathy for nonhuman living entities by getting to know them more through observation and physical interaction, not just in science but especially in our daily interactions with nature. We can also see the boundaries between humans and nature fading in the research towards animal agency (e.g. McFarland & Hediger, 2009), communication (e.g., Gentner et al., 2006; Slobodchikoff, 2009; Andreas et al., 2022), and even plant neurobiology (e.g. Brenner et al., 2006), all making natural entities and their purposes more understandable and relatable.

I think that the development of our empathetic skills in the human context, as Hoffman (2000) describes, is essential for the extension of empathy to nonhuman life. We initially develop the ability to recognize and identify with the subjective perspective of others through social learning in our contact with other people. These cognitive abilities can serve as a basis for developing empathy in our relationships with nature. As the development of a sense of social justice goes along with the development of empathetic skills and these same empathetic skills foster the development of a sense of ecological justice, promoting social justice is supportive of ecological justice.

Several psychological studies support the connection between empathy and the development of a sense of ecological justice. For example, the experimental study of Berenguer (2008) shows that higher levels of empathy towards either a human or a natural entity lead to increased use of moral arguments in environmental decision-making. Specifically, empathy towards a natural entity resulted in more ecocentric arguments, while empathy towards a young man led to more anthropocentric arguments. In another experiment, Berenguer (2007) showed that induced empathy with nature can trigger pro-environmental behaviour. He discovered that people who empathise with a distressed bird or tree not only display increased compassion but also feel a stronger sense of duty to aid both the entity and the broader

natural world. When given the choice to allocate funds to various student programs, these people showed a preference for supporting environmental initiatives.

Tam (2013) also found out that people with a tendency to empathise with nature are more motivated to protect nature and suggests that the mental mechanisms linked to empathy with humans also extend to empathy with nature. Some studies suggest that people's tendency to empathise with other people predicts their pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours (e.g. Schultz, 2001), which would support my argument. Nevertheless, there are inconsistencies in these findings (e.g. Sevillano et al., 2007 found counterevidence). Tam (2013) suggests that the inconsistencies may be explained by differing perceptions of the boundary between humans and nature. For some, empathy towards humans may extend to empathy towards nature, while for others, the relationship may be less clear as they see humans as separate from or even superior to nature. These findings suggest that induced empathy plays a significant role in shaping environmental moral attitudes and behaviours. So psychological studies support the positive psychological connection between empathy and ecological justice that I have been arguing for.

4.6 Half-Earth and Prioritising Ecological Justice

Considering the argument I presented in this chapter, what are we to think of the half-earth plan and the claim that we should prioritise ecological justice over social justice? As mentioned, in promoting social justice, we also promote the development of people's ability to empathise with others because our moral understanding and empathetic skills develop alongside each other. If we commit ourselves to the claim that ecological justice should be prioritised over social justice, we can end up in a situation where socially unjust conservation plans would be accepted whenever someone can prove that this plan would be significantly beneficial to nature. In a society where it is normalised to ignore social injustices, people may develop ignorance of the experiences of others. In light of the positive relationship between empathy and the moral consideration of nature, this would in itself be worrisome. Besides, it may force us to engage less with nature which could frustrate our ability to develop empathy for nature

If we decide, for instance, that the half-earth plan has to be executed, a separation would be made between areas designated for nature and areas designated for people. The areas designated for people would expectedly be more urbanized than the areas designated for nature. Consequently, the interaction between humans and nature would decrease. This could

lead to a type of estrangement from nature that Hailwood (2015) calls inadequate participation in our ongoing relationship with nature. As Hailwood explains, this form of estrangement from nature could lead people to be ignorant of the ecological fact that we are part of a bigger natural world but also and more importantly, it could lead to a lack of ‘lived practical engagement’ (p.201).

Hailwood (2015, p.221) suggests that this lack of lived practical engagement could hinder our ability to acknowledge the reciprocal bond between humans and nature, viewing natural entities as objects in isolation. It can also let us be too taken up by abstract ideas and matters that only consider ourselves and other people, while we ignore nature and the practical issues playing in it. As individuals become increasingly disconnected from nature, their ability to empathise with and understand the natural world expectedly diminishes. This estrangement leads to a lack of appreciation for the biological experiences of nature and a disregard for the impacts of human actions on natural entities. Consequently, a sense of ecological justice fails to develop within society, which could result in apathy towards conservation efforts. This is problematic as without a fundamental shift in perspective and values towards the preservation of nature, human societies will probably struggle to achieve sustainability goals.

By physically separating humans from natural environments, the half-earth plan could inadvertently further alienate individuals from ecological realities. This undermines efforts to stimulate people to develop a sense of justice towards ecological justice. Therefore, the half-earth plan risks exacerbating the very problem it seeks to address by deepening the divide between humans and nature. Instead of facilitating a harmonious relationship with the environment, it could foster a mindset of detachment and indifference, ultimately impeding the efforts towards achieving harmony between humans and nature.

4.7 Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued that social justice plays an important role in fostering ecological justice, as the social abilities developed along with a sense of justice are crucial for understanding and implementing ecological justice. Promoting social justice supports the promotion of ecological justice, as it facilitates the development of empathetic skills necessary for just interactions with both humans and natural entities. By expanding empathy to include nature, as ubuntu prescribes, we can better understand and respond to their experiences, ultimately contributing to a more just relationship with the environment. Considering the argument presented in this chapter, prioritising ecological justice over social

justice, as proposed by initiatives like the half-earth plan, risks exacerbating societal disconnection from nature, frustrating the development of empathy for nature. This would ultimately undermine efforts to achieve ecological justice.

5. Teleology

In this chapter, I will respond to a potential critique of ubuntu's teleological commitments. As explained in Chapter 3, ubuntu supports the view that humans and nature are teleologically connected. Both my arguments presume that this teleological view is reasonable.

Nevertheless, teleological notions are controversial. Some argue that the teleological claims in African philosophy are essentially based on supernaturalistic claims and are therefore 'illogical and mystified' (Matalino, 2011, p.338). If the teleological view seems implausible, the ubuntu view and my arguments become irrelevant.

I will respond to the critique on teleology in two ways. Firstly I will respond by pointing out why it could be reasonable to accept the metaphysical claim that there is purpose in nature. Hereby, I will make use of the work of Aristotle, who can be considered a companion in guilt. Secondly, I will respond by explaining that we do not have to accept teleology as a metaphysical claim for it to have theoretical moral value because in ethics the reasonability of an ethical theory depends on whether it can explain important moral intuitions.

5.1 The Critique

Ubuntu attributes a purpose or telos to humans and nature. In this way, it connects to a broader debate about teleology in nature. The philosophical debate about teleology in nature revolves around the question of whether there is an intrinsic purpose to the natural world or not. This debate has roots in ancient Greek philosophy and continues to be discussed in various forms in contemporary philosophy. In modern times, the debate about teleology and nature has been influenced by developments in science, particularly in the fields of biology and physics. In biology, for example, there is a widespread explanatory use of purposeful explanations for the structure and behaviour of natural entities. The explanatory use of teleological concepts is viewed as unavoidable in contemporary biological fields like evolutionary biology, genetics, medicine, ethology, and psychiatry, due to their significant explanatory value (Allen & Neal, 2020).

Teleology is thought to be controversial for various reasons. Mayr (1974) discusses two reasons why teleology would follow from a commitment to supernaturalist claims. Firstly, teleology could be seen to imply the belief that there is a divine force or designer behind nature. Secondly, teleology could be seen to imply that there is backward causation in nature, which suggests that the future can somehow influence the past. Such teleological views are at

odds with naturalistic explanations because they introduce non-observable elements while naturalistic explanations seek to understand phenomena exclusively through natural causes and processes, without recourse to supernatural or metaphysical explanations. When teleology is linked to supernatural ideas, such as the existence of a divine designer and backward causation, it moves away from naturalistic explanations and enters the domain of faith-based or mystical assertions. This makes teleology implausible to some.

5.2 Teleology as an Ontological Theory

To examine teleology as a metaphysical view, I think it is useful to dive deeper into the work of Aristotle because his ideas on teleology provide a foundational understanding of the concept. I will explain Aristotle's ideas about teleology in nature through Lear's 1988 book on Aristotle. Lear examined the work of Aristotle around the question of what it is for something to exist by nature. Firstly it is relevant to mention that Aristotle (1984, 192b9-193b21) distinguishes natural entities, which are there by nature as they have an internal cause and artefacts, which are caused and changed by some external designer. The forms of artefacts are superficial because they are created by a designer. The forms of natural entities, on the other hand, must be intrinsic from the beginning and have internal principles that guide the entities into growing to their fully realized forms. Lear emphasises that although the form of natural entities is guided by internal principles, the forms are also dynamic. They transcend mere physical structure and actively shape their own development.

Although this is a teleological view because it assumes that forms develop along principles lines towards a fully realized form, it should not be interpreted as complying with supernatural claims according to Lear (Chapter 2). Aristotle (1984, 198b10-200b10) suggested that the goal, namely the fully realized form, does not exist during the process of growth. This form has been inherent to the natural entity throughout its development, though not fully realized from the start. The form serves both as the target towards which the growth process is aimed and as the driving force guiding this process. Lear (1988, p.40) concludes that the end of natural entities is inherent in their form and does not necessarily need to be clear from the start.

So what Aristotle's view comes down to in the eyes of Lear (1988, p.40) is 'the basic ontological reality of forms, combined with the idea that natural forms characteristically develop from potentiality to actuality'. This notion underscores the inherent order and directionality in the natural world without committing to the existence of an ultimate designer

or god or backward causation. By embracing the ontological reality of forms and their dynamic evolution, Aristotle's teleology offers a middle ground between mystical interpretations and purely mechanistic views. It acknowledges the inherent orderliness and directionality in nature without relying on supernatural explanations, thereby providing a framework that aligns with empirical observations. By separating teleology from supernatural beliefs, it becomes less mystical and more compatible with science, making it a more plausible concept within discussions about the nature of reality.

Even though Ramose (1999) associates ubuntu with religion in the chapter 'Religion through ubuntu', the holistic essence of ubuntu does not require the belief in a divine designer of the world. Ramose stresses that the question of whether a god exists or not is ultimately not important. Ubuntu's commitments seem similar to Aristotle's. Just as Aristotle proposed, ubuntu suggests that teleology is inherent to nature. According to ubuntu, the purpose or direction of natural entities arises from the interconnectedness and wholeness of all elements in nature. This interconnectedness dictates the form of individual components within the wholeness. Simultaneously these components influence the form of the whole as they develop. Consequently, each part plays a vital role in maintaining the overall functioning and harmony of the entire system. In essence, nature itself shapes the universal wholeness, simultaneously guiding the behaviour and function of its constituent natural parts. In this way, the wholeness and its parts are always in motion, evolving themselves (Ramose, 1999, Chapter 3). This corresponds with Aristotle's idea of how natural forms continuously evolve into new forms. If we would accept Aristotle's teleology, it would therefore be reasonable to also accept the teleology in ubuntu.

5.3 Teleology as an Ethical Theory

I have thus far tried to defend the reasonableness of teleology as an ontological theory. In African philosophy, there is no clear distinction between ontology and normative claims because of the holistic relational worldview that conceives ontology, epistemology, and ethics as interconnected and inseparable components of the whole (Gädeke, 2020). This means that the teleological ontology has normative implications. Although it can be a fallacy to derive what ought from what is, as discussed in Chapter 3, ontology does restrict what kind of normative theory is reasonable and requires embracing a specific type of normative theory. We can assess teleology both on the plausibility of its ontological claims and on the

reasonability of the kind of normative theory it implies in the sense that it can account for our moral intuitions.

The second approach seems more relevant than the first. After all, the teleological ontology rests on metaphysical claims because we cannot prove if there is purpose in nature. As Ramose (1999, p.49) puts it: 'It is a moot point philosophically whether or not invisible beings are knowable'. The truth behind metaphysical claims is important when the belief in these claims has normative consequences but as there is no way to prove the claims wrong or right, it seems like a better tactic to assess whether the normative consequences support and explain our moral intuitions. So just like teleology can have explanatory value in science, we can consider the explanatory value of teleology in ethics.

The teleological view makes sense to explain the two moral intuitions that are central to this thesis. From the ubuntu teleological view, justice is about being well in relation with others, both humans and nature. The view supports that we need to take care of other people and other entities in nature, which can explain the intuition of both ecological justice defenders and social justice defenders. The teleological view recognizes the importance of both ecological and social justice, without the need to sacrifice one over the other. Teleology stimulates us to attribute significance to nature and other people and reflect on how we can unite the interests of both in light of their interdependence. Thus, I think it is reasonable to endorse teleology, not necessarily for reasons of metaphysics, but certainly for the non-metaphysical reason that it helps make sense of ethical intuitions that people have concerning the environmental crisis.

5.4 Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I have responded to a potential critique of ubuntu philosophy, particularly its teleological commitments regarding the interconnectedness of humans and nature. While such claims are not empirically testable and have been associated with mystical beliefs, I have responded in two ways. Firstly, I have pointed out why the metaphysical claim that there is purpose in nature, is not necessarily based on mystical supernatural assumptions. Ubuntu is consistent with Aristotelian teleology, which does not entail the belief in a divine designer or backward causation. Secondly, I have explained that even if we would not accept teleology for metaphysical reasons, it can still be reasonable to support teleology for the theoretical reason that it helps support and explain moral intuitions.

6. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that we should not prioritise ecological justice over social justice. I have done so by arguing first that we cannot live in harmony with nature unless we critically reflect on our conception of social and ecological justice to make them compatible. Through an ubuntu ethical lens, it is evident that social justice and ecological justice complement each other. The ubuntu perspective recognizes the intrinsic value and purpose of all beings within the larger interconnected system, contrasting with anthropocentric views that may overlook the holistic relationship between humans and nature. Adopting a social justice framework that includes environmental well-being and an ecological justice framework that includes human well-being allows us to promote harmony between humans and nature. Critically examining proposed solutions like the half-earth plan is necessary to avoid exacerbating societal disconnection from nature. Embracing the interconnectedness of humans and nature is crucial for achieving both social and ecological justice within the universal wholeness of existence.

Secondly, I have provided a moral psychological argument to argue that a well-developed sense of social justice combined with engagement with nature allows us to develop a sense of ecological justice. I discussed the pivotal role of empathy in fostering both social and ecological justice. Empathy emerges as a critical component in the development of just human relationships and, subsequently, a sense of ecological justice. As individuals engage with others and consider multiple perspectives, their empathetic skills evolve. By attributing purpose to nonhuman entities and empathising with them, individuals can develop a deeper understanding of ecological dynamics and cultivate a sense of responsibility towards the environment. This perspective aligns with the ubuntu conception of justice, which emphasizes empathy for all beings. Prioritising ecological justice over social justice, as proposed by initiatives like the half-earth plan, risks exacerbating existing social injustices and deepening the disconnect between humans and nature.

Thirdly, I responded to a potential critique of ubuntu's teleological commitments, which is important to uphold both of my arguments. Teleological explanations have been critiqued for their association with supernatural beliefs. To address this critique, I offered two responses. I examined the reasonability of teleology as an ontological theory. Companion in guilt Aristotle points out that teleology is in line with the inherent orderliness and directionality in nature and does not require supernatural explanations. Ubuntu aligns with this view as it

suggests that purposes are intrinsic to nature. So the metaphysical claim that there is purpose in nature, as endorsed by ubuntu, can be reasonable without relying on supernatural assumptions. I also explored the reasonability of teleology as an ethical theory, focusing on its normative implications within the framework of ubuntu. I argued that as an ethical theory, teleology is reasonable because it gives relevance to the important moral intuitions behind both social and ecological justice. The teleological view of ubuntu provides a framework for understanding and addressing pressing ethical challenges related to social and ecological justice.

My thesis adds to the work of Armstrong(2024, Chapter 6) about the social justice objections against the half-earth plan because it shows the relevance of social justice to the realization of ecological justice. In this way, the arguments of Armstrong gain in importance, also viewed from an ecological justice perspective. I would agree with Armstrong (p.18) that ‘Scholars of global justice ought to be much more concerned than they have sometimes appeared about biodiversity loss’. I think this lack of concern rather comes forth out of a lack of awareness of the relationship between social injustices and the environmental crisis than of some kind of anthropocentric obsession. We should not become fixed on the idea of humans as self-interested gluttons but focus on our social, emphatic and imaginative qualities to find a way out of the environmental crisis. In this light, it is important to continue to debate, explore and critically reflect on how humans and nature can be well together.

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