A generous ontology: Identity as a process of intersubjective discovery – An African theological contribution

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ABSTRACT

The answer to the question 'who am I?' is of fundamental importance to being human. Answers to this question have traditionally been sought from various disciplines and sources, which include empirical sources, such as biology and sociology, and phenomenological sources, such as psychology and religion. Although the approaches are varied, they have the notion of foundational truth, whether from an objective or subjective perspective, in common. The question of human identity that is the subject of this paper is germinated from the title of a book by WITS academic, Ivor Chipkin, entitled, *Do South Africans exist? Nationalism, democracy and the identity of 'the people'* (2007). This paper does not discuss Chipkin's thoughts on nationalism and democracy; however, it considered the matter of human identity that is raised by his question. The approach taken by this paper on the notion of identity was significantly influenced by Brian McLaren's postmodernist approach to Christian doctrine as outlined in his book A generous orthodoxy (2004) – a term coined by Yale Theologian, Hans Frei. The inadequacies of traditional approaches to human identity and consciousness that are based upon 'foundational knowledge' were thus considered. Both subjective and objective approaches to identity were touched upon, showing the weaknesses of these approaches in dealing with the complex nature of true human identity. The paper then presented an integrative framework for individual consciousness that is not static or ultimately quantifiable, but rather formulated in the process of mutual discovery that arises from a shared journey. The approach presented here drew strongly upon the groundbreaking work of Ken Wilber and Eugene de Quincey and related their ontological systems to the intersubjective approach to identity that can be found in the African philosophy and theology of 'ubuntu'. This paper focused on how the ethics and theology of this indigenous knowledge system can contribute toward overcoming the impasse of validating individual identity in contemporary academic debates on human consciousness.

INTRODUCTION

Research into human consciousness and individual identity is very much in vogue in the academy at the moment. Scholars in a wide range of disciplines are seeking to approach the mystery and complexity of human consciousness and individual identity from different angles, each hoping to add some new insight and further our knowledge of the human self.

John Mbiti writes the following telling line in the preface of his groundbreaking book *Concepts of God in Africa*, 'African peoples are not religiously illiterate' (1970:xiii). This statement would seem to express an element of common sense that should be evident to all. However, the reality is that most theological debates, and particularly interdisciplinary debates in theology and science, are dominated by insights and wisdom that comes from Europe and America.

There are many, including myself, who share Mbiti's perspective that Africa has a valuable treasure chest of insight to offer to the world in relation to debates on identity and consciousness. One of the most courageous leaders during the South African struggle for liberation from apartheid, Steve Biko (1978), wrote these words before his untimely death:

> … [*Western society*] *seems to be very concerned with perfecting their technological know-how while losing out on their spiritual dimension. We believe that in the long run the special contribution to the world by Africa will be in this field of human relationship. The great powers of the world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look, but the great gift still has to come from Africa – giving the world a more human face.*
>
> (Biko 1978:46)

It is precisely the element of true humanity, or 'humaneness', that this paper wishes to deal with from the perspective of the African ethic of 'ubuntu', here referred to as a 'generous ontology'. There are few African indigenous knowledge systems that are as well known, and as critically regarded, as the southern African concept of 'ubuntu'.

This paper argues the point that the southern African ethics of 'ubuntu', as it relates to the concepts of ontological being and identity, can add a new perspective to the debate of true identity and what it means to be a human person in relation to other human persons. It is hoped that this offering will stimulate some thought and conversation, open new avenues of enquiry and research, and go some way towards legitimising a seldom heard vocabulary in the field of identity and consciousness – namely, the African theological perspective. Boldly overstated, it may even offer some insights into long perplexing aspects of consciousness-validating approaches that have been almost exclusively offered from the Western, scientifically dominated, epistemological approach to human-being.

TOWARDS A 'GENEROUS ONTOLOGY'

The famed Austrian psychologist, Victor Frankl (1984) wrote:

> Man's [sic] search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a 'secondary rationalization' of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning.
>
> (Frankl 1984:120)

The notion of identity has always been central to the human person's understanding of self and the relation of that self to the rest of the Kosmos.[1] The question 'who am I?' is fundamental to human existence and particularly so for persons of faith. Answers to this question have come from a wide range of disciplines; philosophers, theologians, scientists, sociologists and anthropologists have all sought to offer some insights. To be able to identify and place one's self within the world is a crucial element of one's wellbeing. Ontologically, it shapes the image we have of ourselves, as well as our relation to others, and ultimately informs our understanding of the place we understand ourselves to occupy within the whole of the Kosmos.

The advent of postmodernism has caused the once firm foundations of identity to become somewhat uncertain. Galadriel of Middle Earth comments at the opening of the cinematic version of JRR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, 'The world is changed. I feel it in the water. I feel it in the earth. I smell it in the air. Much that once was, is lost, for none now live who remember it'.[2] In a similar vein, Franke remarks on the theological certainties of previous ages noting that the world is changing, 'strange things are happening in unexpected places, long-familiar assumptions are being called into question…' (cited in McLaren 2004:13).

Where one was once able to give an absolute answer to the question 'who am I?', there is now no longer absolute certainty. None of the dominant approaches to individual identity previously considered as authoritative can fully satisfy the complexity of what it means to be who you *truly* are. In short, the various approaches, which will be discussed below, have shown that a comprehensive, all-inclusive, answer that can fully answer the question 'who am I?' is illusive. One cannot say 'I am…' without the necessity of qualifying that by saying 'but, I am also…'. The rigid categories of modernity simply fail to take into account the richness of diversity and experience that comprise the rich tapestry of contributing factors that shape our individual and collective identity.

Whilst each of the answers that are given to the question 'who am I?' do add some valuable insight and help to answer a part of what is asked, each answer is simultaneously inadequate in answering another part of this complex question. Some scholars have reacted negatively against the uncertainty raised by the questioning of these previously unquestionable 'truths' about identity, particularly among theologians who have often claimed a special relationship to 'absolute' knowledge and truth. However, postmodern considerations do not contribute a rejection of truth, knowledge, or rationality, but, rather, a rethinking of rationality, and truth, in the wake of modernity.

> This rethinking has resulted not in irrationality, as is often claimed by less informed critics of postmodern thought, but rather in numerous redescriptions and proposals concerning the understanding of rationality and knowledge. These postmodern ideas produced a more inherently self-critical view of knowledge than modernity.
>
> (Franke cited in McLaren 2004:14)

1. Snyman suggests that the use of the word Kosmos to describe the non-dual universe, rather than the 'anaemic, depth-denying and surface bound "cosmos" of modern science' is of much importance in theology (2002:71). He concurs with the work of Ken Wilber when he notes that the word 'cosmos', 'has not allowed room for spirit and consciousness in its deliberations' (2002:71).

2. This remarkable quotation is used by John R. Franke in McLaren 2004:13.

One of the great struggles in both science and theology, and often the primary source of the impasse that exists between these two complementary disciplines, is the understanding that each holds certain knowledge that is foundationally true. If one investigates the philosophical bases of theories of consciousness and identity from both the objectivist and subjectivist approaches, one is likely to find some element of what the philosophers call 'foundationalism'. This refers to an understanding of knowledge (i.e. that which informs our statements of truth about 'things') that emerged during the Enlightenment. Franke explains that it arose out of an attempt to avoid the 'uncertainty generated by the human tendency toward error and to overcome the inevitable, often destructive disagreements and controversies that followed' (cited in McLaren 2004:14). This question to ascertain 'certainties' that could not be contested involved a paradigm shift in thinking, and research, that reconstructed bodies of knowledge in varying spheres (including theology and the sciences) by rejecting 'pre-modern' notions of absolute authority and replacing them with incontestable beliefs accessible to all individuals. 'The assumptions of foundationalism, with its goal of establishing certain and universal knowledge, came to dominate intellectual pursuit in the modern era' (Franke cited in McLaren 2004:15).

This approach to knowledge and truth has become so pervasive that most persons fall back on it almost unquestioningly. If I were to ask you 'who are you?', you would probably answer with some form of individual validation of who you know and believe yourself to be. In all likelihood, this would either relate to your body and your brain (what you look like and feel like and how you associate that with being yourself). You may, for example, answer, 'I am David', because that is who you psychologically 'feel' yourself to be and it is more than likely how you visualise your physical appearance – the experience of being 'yourself' is an experience that is common to almost all sentient beings. However, what if I reply, 'ok, but there are many Davids in the world, which one are you?' In answer to this you may need to make some objective statement, in addition to your earlier subjective belief, in order to qualify why you believe yourself to be a particular 'David', for example you may say, 'I am the short David with brown hair and green eyes'. Again, you are appealing to a modernist foundational category of knowledge (your measurement of height, the colour of your hair and eyes) and your assumption is that these things mean the same thing to me as they do to you. Or, you may make some subjective statement to qualify why you believe yourself to be a particular 'David', for example, you may say, 'I am the David who remembers growing up as the son of Martha and Dan in Durban'. Here your assumption is that, by locating yourself in relationship to your parents, I will draw on the foundational knowledge of being a son to a parent and so agree that if they validate your identity it must be trustworthy and true. Most persons would accept this as a perfectly reasonable answer, believing that you are, in fact, the person that you claim to be, because you have offered either personal, objective, or subjective, 'evidence' of that fact.

However, identity is no longer a matter that is so easily verifiable.

THE INADEQUACIES OF FOUNDATIONAL KNOWLEDGE

The conundrum of individual self-validating consciousness in a world of confusing 'truths'

Ray Kurzweil asks the pertinent question, 'Am I the stuff in my brain and body?' (cited in Richards 2002:42). In other words, is the stuff of 'my brain and body' a convincing explanation of who I am in the light of credible discoveries and developments in contemporary science and technology? Kurzweil makes two basic observations about the inadequacy of such an approach to identity.

Firstly, he points to basic misunderstandings of permanence and physicality. This misunderstanding of permanence is highlighted in the light of developments in quantum theory and quantum physics. He writes: 'Consider that the particles making up my body and brain are constantly changing. We are not all permanent collections of particles' (cited in Richards 2002:42).

The notion of 'non-permanence', expressed by Kurzweil above, is a plausible scientific understanding of the ever-changing nature of physical matter. In particular, the work of quantum physicist David Bohm has shown that physical reality is an ever-changing movement of constituent elements that we understand to make up physical matter. Bohm calls this movement the 'holomovement' (Bohm 1980:185). In summary, he suggests that all of creation (Bohm's explicate order, i.e. observable, or physical reality) is an ever-changing manifestation of a far greater reality (Bohm's implicate order, i.e. the unseen, underlying, subtle reality). The explicate order is constantly in a state of change because it continually comes out of, and moves back into, the implicate order. Thus, Bohm's view is that all material reality is an explication of a vast number of implicate orders. Bohm maintains that underlying the explicate order (what has traditionally been understood to be a static and constant physical reality), is a 'deeper order of existence, a vast and more primary level of reality that gives birth to all objects and appearances of our physical world' (cited in Talbot 1991:46; cf. Zohar 1991:54). Hence, this world view would maintain that what we perceive as physical reality is not a number of separate, self-contained static objects, which form the sum of the total of their meaning and identity (as is suggested in the Cartesian/Newtonian world view), but, rather, that reality is a dynamic whole in a constant state of change; an explication of the undivided whole that is in a perpetual state of flux[3] (Bohm 1980:185). Based on such an understanding of reality, Kurzweil writes the following in relation to the misconception of basing identity, and an understanding of self, on the perception of a static physical being (physical permanence):

> *The cells in our bodies turn over at different rates, but the particles (e.g. atoms and molecules) that comprise our cells are exchanged at a very rapid rate. I am just not the same collection of particles that I was even a month ago. It is the pattern of matter and energy that are semipermanent (that is, changing only gradually), but our actual content is changing constantly, and very quickly. We are like patterns that water makes in a stream. The rushing water around a formation of rocks makes a particular, unique pattern. This pattern may remain relatively unchanged for hours, even years. Of course, the actual material constituting the pattern – the water – is replaced in milliseconds. The same is true for Ray Kurzweil. Like the water in a stream, my particles are constantly changing, but the pattern that people recognize as Ray has a reasonable level of continuity. This argues that we should not associate our fundamental identity with a specific set of particles…*
> (cited in Richards 2002:42–43)

Few theologians would challenge the central thought expressed in the view above, namely, that individual human identity and consciousness can be entirely contained within, or verified through, what is perceived to be static physical being. Kurzweil also raises a further interesting question about identifying one's self with one's body when he discusses what he calls the 'gradual replacement theory' (in Richards 2002:44). For example, if I have surgery to have a lens replacement in my eyes, does that make me less 'me'? Let's say that, together with the need for eye surgery, my hearing has become impaired and so I have a cochlear implant fitted; does that mean that I am even less 'me'? Most of us would say no to this question. What makes us who we are is not only what we look like, or feel like (in terms of

touch and shape) in our bodies, it is something deeper and more significant that has to do with what goes on inside of our minds – there is a measure of 'consciousness' attached to identity.

If this thesis is accepted then it must mean that a purely objective approach to identity is inadequate, because what I see and feel about myself is constantly changing and so cannot constitute the entirety of who I am. Who I am must thus also have something to do with who I experience, know, and feel myself to be (i.e. subjectivist criteria of validation).

Kurzweil's challenge of the validation of individual consciousness and identity anticipates this and so his objection is not only founded upon objectivist scientific theories. This is his second argument, namely, in addition to the above, he introduces the possibility of doubt in relation to subjectivist criteria for the validation of individual identity.

Let me explain what is meant by a subjectivist approach to validating individual identity. If I cannot say 'I am the short David with the brown hair', because these objective elements of validating who I am are in a constant state of change, or have been swapped out for parts that were not a part of the original 'me', then there must be some other way of identifying that I am truly the David I believe myself to be. As a further complication to your statement of identity, 'I am the short David with the brown hair', I may say 'but I know two Davids who are short with brown hair, how do you know you really are the David you believe yourself to be?' Most persons, when confronted with such a probing question, would revert to subjectivist data to validate who they truly are. For example, David may say 'I know that I am David because I have David's memories, I feel like David feels, therefore I *know* that I am me'.

The element of doubt in relation to subjectivist criteria for the validation of individual identity is even more plausible if one can create some form of emulative technology that so accurately and completely emulated David's subjective characteristics that this technology itself is convinced of its subjective 'David-ness'.[4] Kurzweil postulates that if this emulative machine also believed itself to be David, based on the same set of subjectivist criteria (i.e. it has been programmed with the 'real' David's memory, feelings, experiences, consciousness etc.), it could lead to an identity crisis. The gist of Kurzweil's argument is as follows: if a machine is programmed to believe that it is a particular person, in this instance the person is 'David', how will an interrogator be able to ascertain who the real 'David' truly is when questioning both the human subject and the emulated version of the human subject? The crux of the matter is that both the human 'David' and the emulated 'David' draw on the same set of data and stimuli that validate their identity. that is, both would say, and believe, that they are truly the real 'David' because they both have a memory of being 'David'; both feel like the real 'David' and both have the conscious experience of being a particular person named 'David'. The question, in this instance, is thus what subjective data could the 'real' David draw on in order to convince the interrogator that he truly is the 'only real David'? If the emulation of David is sufficiently detailed and accurate, there should be no extra subjective data that could aid the 'real David' in verifying his true identity.

In summary, this hypothetical identity conundrum highlights a number of deficiencies in the way in which scholarship in objective and subjective approaches to identity has dealt with the notion of individual identity and the validation of such identity.

So studies of, and approaches toward, an understanding of the notion of 'self' have generally fallen into two broad categories.

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3. Along with Bohm 1980, see also Keepin 1993 and Talbot 1991:43–48 for a more detailed discussion of Bohm's theory of the implicate and explicate orders. The intricate technical details of this view are not a necessary component in furthering the argument that Kurzweil uses to show the complexity of human identity and consciousness. However, it is necessary to refer to these theories in brief in order to substantiate the scientific credibility of Kurzweil's thesis.

4. It will not be possible to discuss the plausibility of the development of technologies that could be capable of this level of accurate emulation in a study of this nature. However, for a detailed discussion of the subject please see Forster 2006:39–91.

These are, (1) subjective approaches that seek to validate individual identity by drawing on data obtained from within the individual (psychology and spirituality are two of the most commonly known approaches in this regard) and (2) objective approaches that seek to validate how the individual constructs his or her identity through observing the subject in relation to his or her surroundings and influences. These could even be observable biological influences such as brain function, or social interaction with other persons or the environment (sociology and neuroscience are the two most commonly known approaches in this regard). However, both of these approaches have a common problem – the reliability of foundational knowledge; it can no longer be assumed that persons understand and attach the same meaning to what a certain discipline, or community, or faith, considers unquestionably true.

What is needed is thus not a new set of incontestable foundational truths relating to identity, but rather, a more generous ontology! By this I mean an ontology that is open enough to learn from both objective and subjective discoveries, yet is not limited by the truths of these discoveries. Rather, a generous ontology recognises that truth is neither static, nor absolute and, as such, identity is developmental and complexly related to aspects of being that are not only subjectively experienced or objectively observed.

In relation to the hypothetical identity conundrum discussed above, none of these approaches is able to offer a satisfactory approach that is sufficient in aiding the interrogator in deciding which of the two interview subjects is truly 'David'.

THE DEFICIENCIES OF THE INDIVIDUAL SUBJECTIVIST AND OBJECTIVIST APPROACHES

I am not saying that individual subjectivist and objectivist approaches to identity are completely without merit. In most common situations, one is able to gain some sense of who one is simply by relating to one's body, or one's conscious awareness of self.

However, as was briefly shown above, there are some fundamental weaknesses in these approaches toward individual identity. Whilst the subjectivist approaches to consciousness and identity are valuable in identifying, contemplating and interpreting internal experience and knowledge of self, they are very difficult to verify. The knowledge itself, which is used in the subjectivist approach, is exactly as it is described – subjective. It is fundamentally valid for the individual, but very difficult to verify objectively. Hence, some further approach is necessary to validate individual identity and consciousness in this context.

On the other hand, the objectivist approaches to consciousness and individual identity may be easily quantifiable through observing and comparing the observed data to what is known or expected (whether it be outward appearance, social behaviour, or the neurological functioning of the brain). However, such approaches can clearly not do away with the conundrum that is raised by Kurzweil (i.e. is what we see about ourselves really the same as what we believe it to be?). And, if I change elements of myself (such as lenses, implants, artificial limbs) does that truly mean that I am less 'me'? Clearly there is a need for a more comprehensive approach to validating consciousness and individual identity.

It is also worth noting that whilst there may be some value in using both objective and subjective approaches to individual identity together, such an approach cannot solve the identity conundrum. The fundamental struggle is not just with subjective or objective data. Rather, the struggle lies in the fact that both the subjective and the objectivist approaches to consciousness, which are discussed above, rely on the observation of passive

knowledge (I am, or I know, or I feel). It is passive because it is either an observation of something that is (physical shape, biological functioning of the brain etc.), or a reflection on something that exists apart from the observer (a memory, a feeling, a thought etc.). Passive knowledge is simply too easy to emulate and recreate for it to offer any plausible approach to undeniably verify one's true individual identity. What is required is some form of engagement with the notion of identity that is more than just an observation of, or reflection upon, passive data. What is required is some form of active engagement with the reality of being truly human.

In essence, what is required is 'being in relationship *with*', which is active, rather than just 'being', which is passive. Relationships are living, dynamic, fluid and constantly changing. A relationship cannot be fundamentally 'characterised' or quantified, neither can it be wholly experienced or explained. Relationships require 'generous' discoveries and a constant reinterpretation to glean elements of truth – truths that may change from moment to moment.

A GENEROUS DISCOVERY THAT HAS NO END: AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH TO INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY

One of the most innovative and systematically expressed attempts at such a model of consciousness comes from the integral theorist and theologian Ken Wilber. Snyman (2002) comments that Wilber's objective in developing an integrated approach to consciousness was to,

> … impart a clear and precise understanding of the way consciousness develops and interrelates with other aspects of the universe, which includes all the vast depths of not only the physical, but also the psychological, spiritual, cultural and sociological 'Kosmos'.

(Snyman 2002:71)

In Wilber's formulation, an instance of consciousness (e.g. a moment of conscious self identity as expressed in a statement of identity such as 'I am') is framed within a much broader holarchy. Wilber traces the etymology of the word 'holarchy' from the Latin *hiero*, meaning sacred or holy, and *arch*, which means governance or rule (1995:17). The notion of hierarchies, in theology, was most notably articulated by the 6th-century Christian mystic, Dionysius the Areopagite, who used the term to refer to nine celestial orders, with Seraphim and Cherubim at the top and archangels and angels at the bottom. In this schema, the notion of hierarchy was intended to refer to higher levels of virtue and illumination that could be accessible through contemplative awareness. As philosophy and theology influenced politics and science in subsequent years, this notion of hierarchy became common in a multitude of disciplines. Wilber (1995) sums up the contemporary understanding and use of the term as follows:

> As used in modern psychology, evolutionary theory, and systems theory, a hierarchy is simply a ranking of orders of events 'according to their holistic capacity'. In any developmental sequence, what is whole at one stage becomes a part of a larger whole at the next stage. A letter is part of a whole word, which is part of a whole sentence, which is part of a whole paragraph, and so on.

(Wilber 1995:17)

This notion applies not only to linguistic or representative forms (such as writing or script), it is also widely accepted in empirical disciplines, such as biology and physics, that deal with the forms themselves. Howard Gardner gives the following example of such an approach in biology:

> Any change in an organism will affect all the parts; no aspect of a structure can be altered without affecting the entire structure; each whole contains part and is itself part of a larger whole.

(cited in Wilber 1995:17)

Essentially, that which is a whole in one context, yet at the same

time is a part of another context, is called a 'holon'. Wilber (1995) says that reality

> … is not composed of things or processes; it is not composed of atoms or quarks, it is not composed of wholes nor does it have any parts. Rather, it is composed of whole/parts, or holons. This is true of atoms, cells, symbols, ideas. They can be understood neither as things nor processes, neither as wholes nor parts, but only as simultaneous whole/parts, so that standard 'atomistic' and 'wholistic' attempts are both way off the mark. There is nothing that isn't a holon … Before an atom is an atom, it is a holon. Before a cell is a cell, it is a holon. Before an idea is an idea, it is a holon. All of them are wholes that exist in other wholes, and thus they are all whole/parts, or holons, first (long before any particular characteristics are singled out by us).

(Wilber 1995:33–34)

Contained in Wilber's understanding of holons are two underlying conceptual frameworks. Firstly, there is the notion of inclusion, in which each holon is a part that is simultaneously a whole. Secondly, such a view necessitates some concept of hierarchy, where parts are included into, and superseded by, a greater whole. Whereas the first concept mentioned above is understood as a 'holon', the second concept of a hierarchy of such holons is understood to be a 'Holarchy'. Snyman (2002) sums up Wilber's conceptual framework as follows:

> The whole is always more than the sum of the parts precisely because it provides the means by which the parts are held together. Without this principle, one would be left with isolated parts, or only 'heaps' instead of 'wholes'.

(Snyman 2002:77)

Wilber's notion of holarchies stresses the fundamental interdependence of the elements in both ascending and descending order. Higher orders are fundamentally dependent upon the inclusion of lower orders; the value of a higher order is found in the value of the lower orders. For example, one cannot

produce an emotive poem without sentences which, themselves, require words and one cannot have words without the letters of the alphabet. The sequencing of lower orders to higher orders is an indispensable aspect of the Holarchy. Each holon is both a part and a whole at the same time. The poem as a whole cannot exist without the words, yet the words cannot convey the meaning of the poem without being included into its poetic and expressive structure.

Thus, the development of holons (or whole/parts) has to occur in stages, which, themselves, occur sequentially from lesser to greater wholes. However, this growth does not devalue or disempower any higher or lower stage of the Holarchy. The essence of Wilber's multilevelled approach to consciousness is that it stresses that true identity can never be validated simply by appealing to one level of being.

In the context of this research, I could not truly validate my identity simply by appealing to faculties, experiences and knowledge that are common to my level of being. True identity will have to incorporate some elements that relate to higher levels of being (e.g. God, the ancestors and transcendent reality) and lower levels of being (e.g. the environment, other living creatures). This broadens the notion of individual identity from a single level validation, the multidimensional validation.

If one marries this multidimensional approach to consciousness with a recognition of both one's interior and exterior lives, one comes to an understanding of consciousness, as a holon, having four dimensions (Figure 1). The individual and the collective, the interior and the exterior are all constituent elements of true consciousness and thus true identity.

What Wilber's Holarchic model clearly shows is that true consciousness, and thus effective individual identity validation, requires more than just a subjective reflection on an individual interior experience, or an individual's exterior sensory reality.
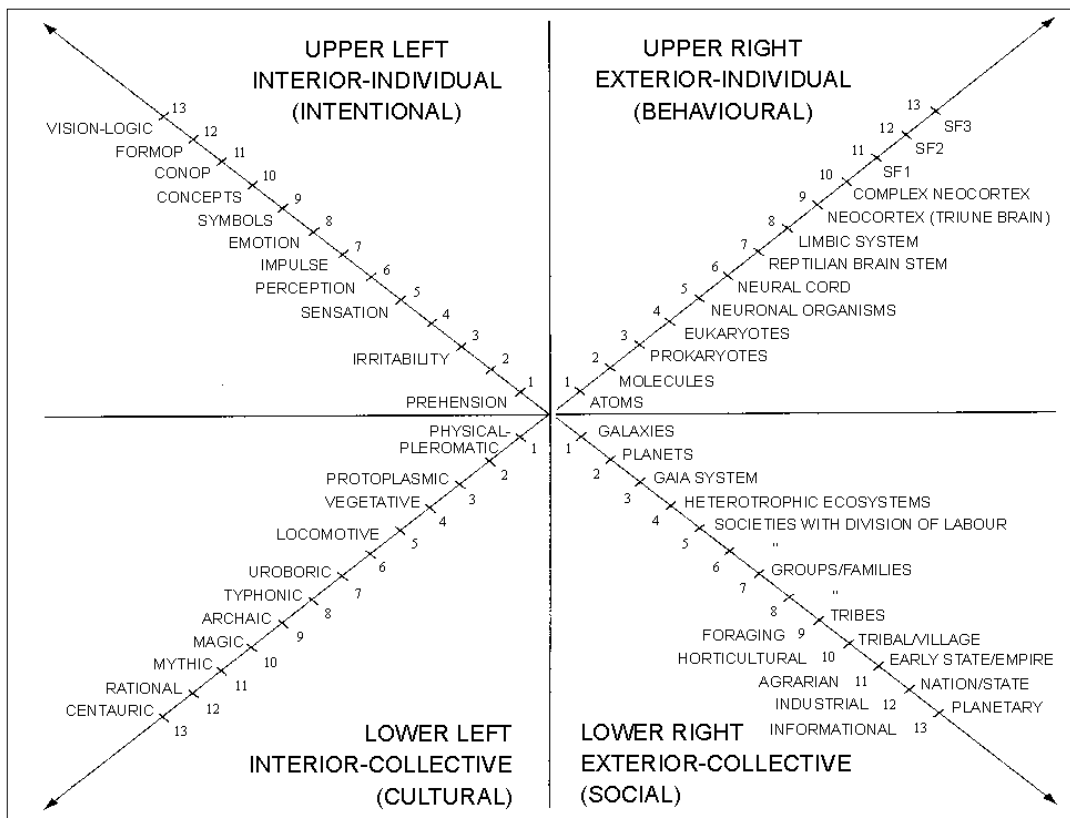
Source: Wilber 1997:4

FIGURE 1
Ken Wilber's four quadrants of consciousness

Moreover, it is also not sufficient to simply apply an objective observation of collective interior culture as expressed by the individual in a group, or collective exterior social interaction with other persons or surroundings, to validate true individual identity and consciousness.

Whilst these approaches may offer some tacit knowledge and insight into the identity of the person, true identity requires a far more rigorous and interactive engagement with the conscious being (not just a passive observation and reflection on static knowledge gained from the person's subjective experience, or from observing the person objectively).

In short, an identity claim that comes closer to the truth of who one is must take cognisance of the interior and exterior life, it must heed individual and social characteristics and it must be based upon an understanding of its wholeness within the context of both higher and lower levels of consciousness.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE AFRICAN WORLD VIEW AND THE INTEGRATIVE APPROACH TO CONSCIOUSNESS AND IDENTITY

Within the debate of, and integrated approach to, consciousness, an African approach matches the most important criteria suggested above. This section of the paper will show where the African view of personhood enforces an 'integrated approach' to consciousness and being – thus helping to overcome the impasse of identity

The African world view overcomes, and corrects, many of the effects of radical dualism between self and other that have become so commonplace in the West. In particular, it deals with the notion that 'truth' is reality (in a static empirical sense). Truth, in this framework, is not known but discovered.

Placide Tempels was one of the first persons to articulate clearly the essential tenets of the African world view in scholarly terms for a Western audience. He writes that the concept of 'separate beings which find themselves side by side, entirely independent of one another, is foreign to Bantu thought' (1959:58). He further says:

> Bantu hold that created beings preserve a bond one of another, an intimate ontological relationship, comparable with the causal tie which binds creature and Creator. For the Bantu there is interaction of being with being, that is to say, of force with force.[5] Transcending the mechanical, chemical and psychological interactions, they see a relationship of forces which we should call ontological.
>
> (Tempels 1958:58)

Such an approach is in contrast to the pervasive dualism that exists in much of modern Western scholarship. It was Rene Descartes's 'radical doubt' that led him to the point of doubting everything, except the self who was doubting (or thinking). Hence his famous dictum; 'I think therefore I am' (*cogito ergo sum*). Mcunu points out that this led Descartes to reduce 'the human person to a thinking mechanism and the body was seen as a separate substance from the mind' (Mcunu 2004:24). Alexis Kagame, the Franco-African philosopher tests this assertion when setting out to evaluate Tempels's theories through linguistic analysis. In his *La philosophie Bantu-Rwandaise de l'etre* (1966) he analyses the term *ntu* that can be roughly translated as 'being'. Mudimbe's summary of Kagame's conclusion is that 'the Bantu equivalent of *to be* is strictly and only performed as a copula. It does not express the notion of existence, and therefore cannot

translate the Cartesian *cogito*' (Mudimbe 1985:189). Balcomb notes the significance of this insight in saying that 'the essence of African ontology, usually adumbrated in the expression "I am because others are, and because others are I am", is diametrically opposed to the Cartesian schema' (2004:71).

Below is Mudimbe's (1985) summary of Kagame's analysis of the root word *ntu* as an expression of African ontology:

> In sum, the **ntu** is somehow a sign of a universal similitude. Its presence in beings brings them to life and attests to both their individual value and to the measure of their integration and dialectic of vital energy. ',Ntu' is both a uniting and a differentiating vital norm which explains the powers of vital inequality in terms of difference between beings. It is a sign that God, father of all beings … has put a stamp on the universe, thus making it transparent in a hierarchy of sympathy. Upwards one would read the vitality which, from minerals through vegetables, animals and humans, links stones to the departed and God himself. Downwards, it is a genealogical filiation of forms of beings, engendering or relating to one another, all of them witnessing to the original source that made them possible.
>
> (Mudimbe 1985:189–190)

Balcomb (2004) comments on the significance of this saying that:

> The interconnectedness of the universe, beginning with the creator and going all the way down to rocks, can surely not be more strongly stated. Here is a system that is indeed a Cartesian nightmare and a Whiteheadian dream.
>
> (Balcomb 2004:71)

The essential unity between self and others, as well as the self and the entire Kosmos, is a vitally important aspect in relating the African world view to an integrated approach to consciousness.[6]

Edwards (1998:85–96) suggests at least three areas in which the African world view overlaps with the integrative approach. These areas are as follows:

- Firstly, both approaches express an understanding that existence is multidimensional and a dynamic process.[7]
- Secondly, what is experienced, as the 'phenomenal world', is a continuously unfolding expression of a deeper, subtler, and yet equally real, form of reality.[8] African spirituality, in particular, is very sensitive to the non-sensory and super-sensory realm. Hence it avoids the pitfalls of the Western 'mono-dimensional, materialistic world-view' (Edwards 1998:95).
- Thirdly, existence consists of 'nested holarchies' (Wilber

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5. Balcomb points out that many African philosophers have taken issue with Tempels's equation of 'being' and 'force' in African thought. Regardless, he notes that few have taken issue with the central assertion of his argument, that is, that 'African ontology valorises the interconnectedness of all being' (Balcomb 2004:70).

6. Of course many scholars will point to the erosion of this world view in African society. There can be no doubt that it would be naïve to assume that all Africans view the world in such an integrated manner. The effects of individualism, westernisation and the stigmatisation of African concepts of being have had a marked effect on the prominence of the African world view. (From modernising influences in schools and from ignorant religious movements in Christianity and Islam, there has been a significant effect in the breakdown of traditional African patterns of thought and resulting behaviour).

7. An example of the way in which the integrative approach relates to the African world view, in the context of this topic, is the negative influence that individualism and reductionism have had on the study of ontological identity. Western science and philosophy has sought to understand individual identity by simply investigating the inward (emotional, psychological) and outward (biological processes of the brain, social interactions) of individuals. The African approach is much more holistic, asking not only first-person questions (who are you? – psychology) and third-person questions (who do others say that you are? – sociology), but also by observing second-person interrelatedness (who are we? how does that inform who you are and who we perceive you to be?). In short, in the African approach, one cannot reduce identity simply to the experiences of the individual, or the perceptions of the group. One must employ an integrative approach that takes cognisance of both approaches and more. Wilber uses a wonderful metaphor to illustrate this. He writes: 'You can take the watch apart but it won't tell you the time …' (1996:25). Thus, wholeness is not found in the parts.

8. This notion is most clearly illustrated in the African understanding that there is no radical separation between spirit and matter, life and death. Rather, all of life is a continuum from one form of existence to another. Du Toit expresses this clearly when he writes: 'For Africans there are no ontological gaps between existing entities. The Western natural–supernatural dualism is foreign to them. God, humankind, extrahumans and subhumans are all regarded as integral parts of a single totality of existence. God's actions are not experienced as extra-ordinary. African metaphysical thinking is holistic …' (Du Toit 2004:30).

1996:99), in which the higher levels transcend and include the lower levels and where there is mutual inter-penetration of all entities within each level.[9] The value of the African world view, with its emphasis on 'being-human-together',[10] is that it takes account of various levels of consciousness (i.e. it is pluridimensional,[11] taking account not only of individual consciousness, but also collective consciousness, and even subtler forms of spiritual consciousness) (Edwards 1998:95).

'UBUNTU' AS A RELATIONAL ONTOLOGICAL APPROACH TO INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY

The importance of the ethics of 'ubuntu' in shaping identity in traditional African societies cannot be underestimated. Makhudu (1993) emphasises this when he writes:

> Every facet of African life is shaped to embrace Ubuntu as a process and philosophy which reflects the African heritage, traditions, culture, customs, beliefs, value system and the extended family structures.
>
> (Makhudu 1993:40)

This pervasive ethic relates to the notion of individual self-validating identity in two ways that will be discussed in the sections that follow.

The vertical element: The wholeness and harmony of all reality (created and uncreated, seen and unseen)

In order to fully understand the ethics of 'ubuntu' it is necessary first to understand a fundamental aspect that underpins this ideological position – that is, the African world view places a significant emphasis on the 'wholeness of all being' (Setiloane 1998:75). The African world view regards wholeness as a primary aspect of the Kosmos. This emphasis on wholeness can thus be discovered in all spheres of the African world view, beginning with God and ending in creation (Figure 2).

The concept of God in African religion

Kudadjie and Osei (2004:35) comment that there is no single view of God in relation to the Universe. However, there is a predominant understanding that all that exists comes from a Supreme Being.[12] Moreover, it is God who sustains and provides for the created order through elements of sunshine, rain, fertility, good health and so on.

9. This process can be vividly illustrated when looking at the African understanding of the interrelationship between the 'living' and the 'living dead' (often referred to as the 'Ancestors'). The living, in base terms, have an influence upon the subtler, spiritual, realm of the living dead and this influence is reciprocal in nature. The attendance to traditional ceremonies to honour and include the ancestors brings joy to the ancestors and also encourages the ancestors to act benevolently towards the living (in many areas such as fertility, prominence in the community, wealth, health etc.) (cf. Thorpe 1991 chapter 7 for a detailed discussion of this interactive process). For a more detailed insight into this element of African traditional religion and thought see Louw 2001 and, for a detailed exposition the notion of 'ubuntu' as 'extended family', cf. Broodryk (1997a:14, 1997b:70f, 2002; Shutte 2001:18).

10. This is Edwards's expression of the concept of 'ubuntu' that will be discussed in detail in the remainder of this chapter.

11. Wilber's earlier thoughts on consciousness posited the notion that reality is pluridimensional in nature (i.e. made up of a plurality of dimensions). Plurality expresses the notion that more than one state can exist at one time. Multiplicity, on the other hand, suggests that there are different stages of existence, but that one moves from one to another (because there are many). For a detailed exposition of Wilber's thesis of pluridimensional reality see Wilber 1975 'Psychologia perennis: The spectrum of consciousness' and the somewhat adapted, *The spectrum of consciousness* (1977).

12. The Akamba of Kenya variously call God, Creator, Maker, Cleaver (Mbithi 1990:39). Whereas the Akan of Ghana describe God as Excavator, Hewer, Carver, Creator, Originator, Inventor and Architect (Danquah 1944:28, 30). The Akan, Banyarwanda (from Rwanda), Nuer (from Sudan), and Shona (from Zimbabwe) believe that God continues to create, using existing materials to mould and shape creation as a potter does (Maquet 1954:166).
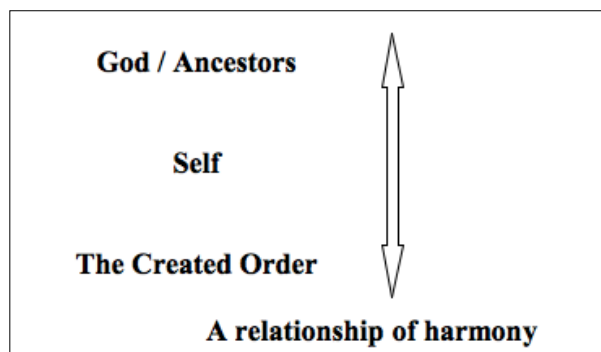

FIGURE 2
The vertical element: The wholeness and harmony of all reality

> *The universe itself – comprising both seen and unseen reality (spirit beings, human beings, plants, animals, mountains, waters, stellar bodies, and all) is a whole, a community with symbolic influences and relationships. It is also commonly believed that, through the laws of nature and various spiritual forces, as well as human customs and institutions, God sustains and upholds the world. Thus, he maintains an orderly and harmonious world so that all can perform their own duties in it.*
>
> (Kudadjie & Osei 2004:36)

The Ancestors and the rest of the created order

In the African world view there is a strong belief that God is the overall governor and controller of the Universe. However, ancestors and spirit powers take part in the governance and administration of the natural order and human affairs (Mbiti 1990:40). In order to maintain harmony in creation, one must thus seek to show respect to all living things (both those that are seen, and those that are not seen), that is, all of the created order (human beings, plants, animals) and the unseen world (the ancestors and spirit beings, as well as God). At times it would be necessary for a person, or group of persons, to perform some ritual action to restore the equilibrium in creation, or to influence or change a state of affairs (i.e. to seek healing, or prosperity, to ask for blessing, or guidance etc.) (Kudadjie & Osei 2004:37).

Hence, the maintenance of harmony and equilibrium in the wholeness of creation is of fundamental importance in the African world view. Human persons are part of a much wider, and very significant, community of living beings. Social relationships and identity within this community are extremely important. Who I am, what my role is and how I contribute towards the wholeness of the community (both seen and unseen) is essential to maintaining balance and keeping God, the ancestors and spirit beings at peace. This further maintains peace and harmony in the life of the individual and the extended community.

Thus, my identity is fundamentally related to higher and lower levels of life, to other humans and to my own interior life. Moreover, since identity is relational, it emerges out of an active engagement with the whole of the Kosmos; it is not just an observation of either subjective or objective data, rather, it is an active, intersubjective element of being in harmony with all other beings.

The horizontal element: Compassionate, humble engagement through the ethics of 'ubuntu' in order to foster dignity

In order to maintain the respectful equilibrium of the Kosmos, African philosophy developed an aphorism to express the fundamental identity and responsibility of the privileged human
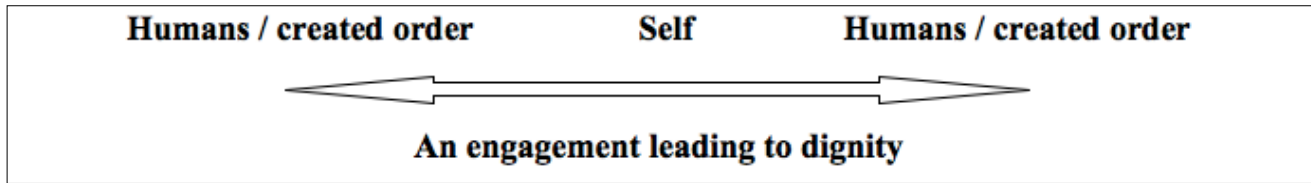
FIGURE 3
The horizontal element: Compassion and humbleness through the ethics of 'ubuntu'

position in the cosmic order: *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*[13] (translated from Zulu into Sotho it reads – *Motho ke motho ka batho*). This statement is often translated as: 'a person is a person through other persons'[14] (Ramose 1999:49f; Shutte 1993:46).

The meaning of the term 'ubuntu'

At the heart of the above statement is the word 'ubuntu', which variously means 'humanity', 'humanness', or even 'humaneness'.

> *These translations involve a considerable loss of culture-specific meaning. But, be that as it may, generally speaking, the maxim 'ubuntu ngumumntu ngabantu' articulates a basic respect and compassion for others…. As such, it is both a factual description and a rule of conduct or social ethic. It not only describes human being as 'being-with-others', but also prescribes how we should relate to others, i.e. what 'being-with-others' should be all about.*
>
> (Louw 2001:1)

Linguistically, Mfenyana asserts that for one to fully understand the meaning of the word 'ubuntu' it is necessary to separate the prefix 'ubu' from the root '-ntu' (1986:2).[15] This is because the word 'ubuntu' qualifies the noun *umuntu* (meaning the human person). These words are common in many southern African languages, for example, 'in isiXhosa it is Um*ntu*, in isiZulu it is umu*ntu*' (Mcunu 2004:30, original emphasis). In terms of the word 'ubuntu', *ubu* refers to the abstract, whereas *-ntu* is a reference to the ancestor who spawned human society and gave human beings their way of life. Thus,

> *[i]t is a communal way of life which deems that society must be run for the sake of all, requiring cooperation as well as sharing and charity … Ubuntu consequently, is the quality of being human.*
>
> (Broodryk 2002:13)

Thus, the term 'ubuntu' can be applied descriptively, that is to say, one could hear someone saying a person has 'ubuntu' – '*usibani bani ungumuntu*' (or in Sotho '*mang mang o nale botho*'), meaning 'that person is a human' or, 'that person has "ubuntu"'.[16] Thus one would say a person is *umuntu* (a human being) because he or she possesses or displays the characteristics of 'ubuntu'. Naturally the opposite can also be said of a person or community. '… [O]ne would hear people saying, *akamuntu walutho lowo* ("that one has no use or help"). To this we must add that ubuntu is an art and quality of being human' (Mcunu 2004:31).

13. At times it is expressed more fully as *Umuntu ungumuntu ngabanye ngabantu*.

14. Louw (2001:1) notes that many definitions of 'ubuntu' have been given by various philosophers and authors, all of which relate closely to the one given here (cf., for example, Bhengu 1996:1–12; Broodryk 1995:5f, 1997a:1–2, 1997b:27f; Pityana 1999:144–145; Prinsloo 1994, 1995:2, 1998:41–43; Sindane 1994:1–2, 1995:8–9; Teffo 1995:1–2).

15. For further details on the now defunct 'Sash Magazine' please see the following Url: http://disa.nu.ac.za/journals/jourbsexpand.htm

16. As a minister of the Methodist Church of southern Africa, I first came across this concept in the earlier 1990s whilst I was a minister serving in a black Church in a Township in the North-West Province. Many of my members were migrant labourers who worked on the mines. After the death of one of our members, we collected some monies within the community to take with us to the funeral in the Eastern Cape. When at the funeral, I heard one of the speakers paying tribute to our Church, saying something along the lines of 'When our brother was in the mine we did not know that he lived there with humans (*umuntu*), but now we have seen how they care ('ubuntu'). We now know that he lived there with humans (*umuntu*)'. It was the humane care of the community that defined them as human, not their biological makeup. This was the first time I truly began to understand the essence of 'ubuntu'.

'Ubuntu' and relational ontology – An engagement of dignity

A central element of 'ubuntu' in relation to identity, is the understanding that personhood (both in social structure and identity) is never understood without reference to the community of dignity (Figure 3). Mcunu writes that the 'best way of being a person according to African understanding of the human person is to have ubuntu' and that '[u]buntu is the ideal stage of being a human person' (2004:25). The unity and harmony of personhood expressed in 'ubuntu' 'stretches from the world seen through the naked eye to the world of ancestors, the spirit world' (2004:25). Berglund (1976) records the following statement from a traditional African healer (*sangoma*):

> *Whites have failed to see that in Africa a human being is an entity, not in the first instance divided up into various sections such as the physical body, the soul and spirit. When a Zulu is sick it is the whole man that is sick, his physical as well as his spiritual being that is affected.*
>
> (Berglund 1976:82)

Moreover, not only does the African concept of 'ubuntu' express the fundamental unity of the spiritual and material worlds, it also clearly holds to the notion that identity is developed through interaction, over time. As a person participates with others and the environment, the person's identity (who the person is in society, who the person sees him or herself to be and the community's relation to the person) changes.[17] 'Personhood should be seen as going through the stages of human development or growth, namely, birth, living and death' (Mcunu 2004:27, see also Kamalu 1998:31). In fact this process does not end at death. The Zulu people of southern Africa never spoke of a person's death in the manner in which death is spoken of today (i.e. as final – an end to the person's life). 'They will say *udlulile emhlabeni*, meaning that a person has passed on to another stage of life. This implies clearly that a person never loses his/her personhood at "death"' (Mcunu 2004:27). Thus, participation, from birth, through life and beyond this life, is key to the identity and role of the human person.

> *… [T]he essence of being is participation in which humans are always interlocked with one another… the human being is not only a 'vital force', but more a 'vital force' in participation.*
>
> (Setiloane 1986:14)

More directly to the point, and of cardinal value to the central thrust of this paper, Du Toit (2004) writes the following about 'ubuntu', with a clear application for the theme of this paper:

> *In Africa, a person is identified by his or her interrelationships and not primarily by individualistic properties. The community identifies the person and not the person the community. The identity of the person is his or her place in the community. In Africa it is a matter of 'I participate, therefore I am'[18]… Ubuntu is the principle of 'I am only because we are, and since we are, therefore I am'. Ubuntu is African humanism.*
>
> (Du Toit 2004:33)

17. In fact, this concept is most clearly expressed in the various rites of passage that an African person goes through from birth to adulthood, from adulthood into marriage, from marriage to parenthood, from parenthood to being an elder, and eventually to the status of passing beyond this life to being a member of the 'living dead', that is, an Ancestor. Mcunu notes these various stages of human development in relation to the African concept of personhood in his Masters thesis (2004:27–28).

18. Here Du Toit references Shutte 1993:46–51.

This notion is attested to by both Mcunu and Setiloane, who affirm that, 'ubuntu is the manifestation of humanity and the divine … It is the oneness of being and oneness with all spheres [of existence]' (Mcunu 2004:36; cf. Setiloane 1986:16). This ethic of harmony with higher and lower life forms is central to the integrative approach.

Intersubjectivity – A shared dignity that is more than just a functional relationship

Attention needs to be given to the elements of the ethics of 'ubuntu' in relation to the active engagement in horizontal relationships that shape who one is. True identity is not only based on the tasks or roles of the individuals, it is a true intersubjective identity that is shaped in and through shared life in the community. Du Toit (2004) goes on to write that,

> [f]or Africans, to be human is to participate in life and respect the conditions that make life possible. To participate in life means ultimately to participate in the fellowship of the community. African community-based society does not designate a communal or collectivist society, but rather one reminiscent of an organism. The collectivist society inevitably places the emphasis on the individual and his or her needs. African society emphasises solidarity rather than activity, and the communion of persons rather than their autonomy … That personhood is identified by an individual's interaction with other persons does not eliminate personal identity … It simply says that my personal identity comes to the fore in my interaction with, and place in, my community.
>
> (Du Toit 2004:33; cf. Louw 2001:10)

Louw points out that one of the emphases of the 'ubuntu' ethic in post-apartheid South Africa has been to 'create a balance between complete individual autonomy and homonymy, i.e. to broaden respect for the individual and purge collectivism of its negative elements' (2001:10). He clearly makes the point that 'oppressive communalism', which robs persons of their identity and rights, as is seen in many places throughout Africa and the world, is not the intended outcome of the 'ubuntu' ethic in the African world view (Louw 2001:10). He supports his argument by referring to Ndaba (1994), who writes that,

> … the collective consciousness evident in the African culture does not mean that the African subject wallows in a formless, shapeless or rudimentary collectivity … [Rather, it] means that the African subjectivity develops and thrives in a relational setting provided by ongoing contact and interaction with others.
>
> (Ndaba 1994:14)

True 'ubuntu', Louw points out, operates in a dialogical manner, it incorporates both 'relation and distance' (2001:10). 'It preserves the other in her otherness, in her uniqueness, without letting her slip into the distance' (Louw 2001:10–11).[19] Shutte echoes this in writing, 'the community is not opposed to the individual, nor does it simply swallow the individual up; it enables each individual to become a unique centre of shared life' (2001:9).

Dignity and respect: One of the primary reasons why this 'life orientation' is able to work is because of the notions of dignity and respect. 'Respect entails listening to the other person and it also involves humility, honesty and treating others as you want them to treat you' (Mcunu 2004:36).[20] Mcunu acknowledges that, at times, Westerners have been critical of 'ubuntu', suggesting that the emphasis on community overlooks the uniqueness and distinctness of human persons. Of course, such things do happen in reality and can often lead to abusive and unhealthy communities. However, such an abusive community would not be in keeping with the true sense of the African world view; in short, such an abusive community would be deemed as

19. See the following supporting references, Shutte 1993:49, 51 and Macquarrie 1972:110.

20. However, both Du Toit and Mcunu point to the reality that poverty and struggle in Africa have often eroded this respectful, dignity-based world view of mutual dependence and cooperation (Du Toit 2004:33; Mcunu 2004:36).
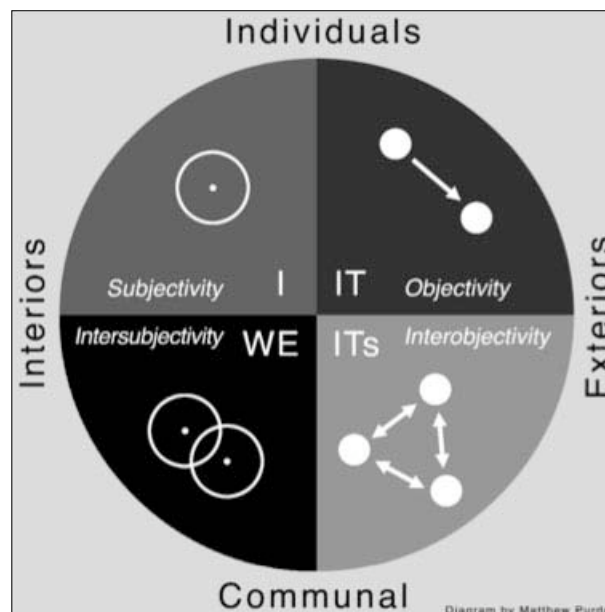
Source: De Quincy 2005:206

FIGURE 4
Eugene de Quincey's interpretation of Ken Wilber's four quadrants of consciousness

devoid of 'ubuntu' (cf. Shutte 2001:9). Mcunu (2004) writes from personal experience of African community saying,

> I agree with Shutte, because the community nurtures the individual and coaches the individual as the community promotes his/her human development. The community norms are there to ensure that [the] individual person is helped towards self-realisation and self-actualisation.
>
> (Mcunu 2004:39)

It is thus essential to note that individual identity is based upon a complex active interrelationship of beings that share a common meaning in community. This can most accurately be described as an intersubjective (shared ontological) approach to identity (Figure 4).

Eugene de Quincey (2005) describes this notion of intersubjective identity as follows:

> Intersubjectivity is 'knowing through relationship' – a form of non-sensory, non-linguistic connection through "presence" and "meaning", rather than through mechanism or exchanges of energy… intersubjectivity [is]… 'consciousness as communion'.
>
> (De Quincey 2005:2)

Thus, if one were to apply the dialogical conceptual framework of 'I–Thou' developed by Martin Buber in his philosophical essay *Ich un Du* (1923),[21] one would be able to show that, in the African world view, it is neither the 'I' (individual) nor the 'Thou' (community) that takes ontological primacy. Rather, the ontological primacy is focused on the hyphen, the 'between', of the I–Thou. Ramose (1999) writes:

> The African concept of a person as wholeness does not deny human individuality as an ontological fact, as an analytic finitude, but ascribes ontological primacy to the community through which the human individual comes to know both themselves and the world around them.
>
> (Ramose 1999:79)

Since Ramose is not addressing the three elements presented above (the 'I', the 'between' and the 'Thou'), his reference focuses, almost exclusively, on the individual within the community. However, the weight of the statement rests in the words 'to the community *through which* the individual comes to know …'.

21. First translated into English in 1937, see Gregor Smith 1937.

Inadvertently, he makes this crucial point about where the true primacy of being lies. Neither the individual, in isolation, nor the community, apart from the individuals which are together the community, shape meaning. Rather, true meaning comes from mutual interrelationship, the 'between', of the individual and the community. It is the individual that enriches, builds up, maintains and develops the community. Whilst, on the other hand, it is the community that enriches, builds up, maintains and develops the individual. This can be seen in the two phrases that are used with reference to individuals in the isiZulu language, namely, *izithopo* (which praises the individual, in the assumption of unique talent and giftedness, achievements and ability) and *izithakazelo* (which locates that giftedness, talent, ability and endeavour found in the person as belonging within the clan or community).

> *'Izithopo' are attributes of the individual person and his/her unique role in the community. 'Izithakazelo' are what I share with the community and how I relate to the community … This shows that there is a mutual fraternity between the greater community and human individuality.*
>
> (Mcunu 2004:40)

Shutte has likened the African community to a living organism 'rather than an artificial whole' (Shutte 2001:26). In a living organism, such as a person, it is neither the individual cells nor the whole body which are more important, but the intercommunion between the two, which is the life of that organism, that is most important. Ruch and Anyawu (1984) write:

> *The whole African society, living and living-dead are a living network of relations almost like that between the various parts of an organism. When one part of the body is sick the whole body is affected. When one member of the family or clan is honoured or successful, the whole group rejoices and shares in the glory, not only psychologically but ontologically: each member of the group is really part of the honour.*[22]
>
> (Ruch & Anyawu 1984:143)

Thus, the notion of personhood and identity is achieved in the *interaction between* the individual and the community, as has already been shown, and the content and values of this interaction (as well as the description of the harmony of such interaction) is found and expressed in the ethics of 'ubuntu'. Shutte summed up the intersubjective aspect of 'ubuntu' succinctly in one of his various translations of the phrase *ubuntu ngumumtu abantu*, when he writes, 'I participate, therefore I am' (1993:46–51). This same intersubjective understanding is substantiated by Mcunu: 'It is this ontology that sets African anthropology distinct, not separate, from Western anthropology' (2004:41).

Furthermore, intersubjectivity from an African perspective suggests that a person grows more fully human, more truly in their identity, through engagement with other persons. Shutte (2004) presents the essence of this African perspective in writing that:

> *The key idea here is that a human person exists and develops as a person only in relation to other persons. The human self is not to be seen as something already formed and present in each human individual at birth. Instead,* [*the person*] *is still to be formed in the course of living. And it can only come into existence through the gift and influence of others. It is thus in no way material, something inside the body or the individual as for example, a mind-brain identity theorist might surmise. Insofar as it exists in a place it exists outside the body, in relation to other persons and the whole material environment. It is truer to the African idea, however, to see self and other as co-existing, each in the other in the sense of being identified with each other. The fundamental human reality must be seen as a field of personal energy in which each individual emerges as a distinct pole or focus. The field of life is the same in each; in each it is their humanity. All persons form a single person, not as parts for a whole, but as friends draw their life and character from the spirit of a common friend. They have a common identity.*
>
> (Shutte 2004:52–53)

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22. When celebrating the honour of a member of the community the following is often said, '*ingane yethu iyiphakamisile indawo yethu*' (our child has done us proud in our community) (Mcunu 2004:41).

De Quincey (2005) points out that this realisation is becoming increasingly popular in a variety of academic disciplines, from systems theory, to quantum science, consciousness studies and, of course, the rediscovery of the perennial philosophy of the world's spiritual traditions. He writes that all of these contributions tell us that, as individuals,

> *… we are definitely not alone … we don't form relationships, they form us. We are constituted by webs of interconnection. Relationship comes first, and we emerge as more or less distinct centers within the vast and complex networks that surround us. In this new view, we are noted in the complex web of life. Each of us is a meeting point, a center of convergence, for countless threads of relationship. We are moments in time and locations in space where the universe shows up – literally, as a phenomenon (from the Greek "phainomenon", 'to appear' or 'to show'). In other words, in this "new story" we emerge as subjects from intricate networks of interrelatedness, from webs of intersubjectivity.*
>
> (De Quincey 2005:182)

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have attempted to show the deficiency of purely objective and subjective approaches to individual identity that are based upon the concept of 'foundational knowledge'. As an alternative, I have sought to present a more 'generous ontology' that is based upon an intersubjective understanding of the fluid formation of identity, particularly as this arises out of the ethics of 'ubuntu'.

I have argued that, in African intersubjectivity, a person is a only a person through their relation to other persons. The question 'who am I?' (subjective) is intricately related to 'who you say that I am' (objective) and 'who we are together' (intersubjective). Instead of being a lone subject, or a quantifiable and containable object, we are all 'intersubjects', fundamentally interwoven into a common cosmic identity; human beings that are run through with sacred dignity. It is not just me, it is not just you, it is not just the material reality, neither is it just the spiritual reality; true reality is a sacred interweaving of all these things – true reality is beyond one single quantifiable truth, it is generous. True identity, in this sense, is a dynamic engagement and discovery of mutual identity and shared dignity – that is, a generous ontology.

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