

PROLEGOMENA TO UBUNTU AND ANY OTHER FUTURE SOUTH
AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

In this thesis I consider ubuntu as a metonym for the particularly African features of South African philosophy. Given that Mbembe critiques African philosophy in general as having failed because it has been subsumed under two unreflective *political* movements in African thought, I consider whether or not the concept of ubuntu escapes his critique. After developing criteria for measuring the success of any philosophical concept, I conclude that ubuntu is unsuccessful. I then identify the political constraints placed on ubuntu that lead to its failure. These constraints arise from having to validate Africa as a *place* of intellectual worth. Considering the role of place in these constraints, I argue that a far more productive approach to ubuntu (and South African philosophy in general) is to explicitly incorporate *this* place into our philosophical project. I use the conceptual framework developed by Bruce Janz to provide a systematic account of place that can be used in formulating South African philosophy. I add to Janz, arguing that philosophy is a response to a particular feature of place: the mystery. By incorporating place into ubuntu, I am able to start developing a philosophical concept which can fulfil the political constraints placed on ubuntu without sacrificing its philosophical integrity. I suggest that ubuntu remains an interesting concept primarily because it promises to respond to the fragmentation of the South African place. I conclude by arguing that ubuntu should be used as the basis for a civic religion which responds to the fragmentation of the South African place. This civic religion will give rise to a significantly distinct philosophical tradition which should not succumb to Mbembe's critique.

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Preliminary remarks:

Is South African Philosophy Successful?

South Africa often sits on the boundary between being an international heavy-weight and being 'just another third-world country'. Different sectors of South African life fare differently when the question of how successful South Africa has been is raised. So it makes sense to ask whether or not South African philosophy has been successful. Worryingly, Achille Mbembe (2002) identifies a fundamental failure in African Philosophy in general, and one must wonder whether this applies to South African philosophy. According to him, African philosophy has failed to become a rigorous, critical tradition of thought because it has been subverted by non-philosophical, 'political'¹ concerns: African Philosophy has time and again found itself having to submit to politically contingent demands which have little regard for truth or accurate reflection. But what makes this failure all the more remarkable is that Africa *as a context* in fact shares many traits that have given rise to some of the best, and most interesting, philosophical traditions. Mbembe compares the history of suffering and struggle that is the foundation of African intellectual projects with the similar histories that have given rise to Jewish and German traditions of philosophy (2002: 240). In these two traditions, a history of suffering and struggle has prompted a deeper reflection on, and a deeper philosophical understanding of, the human condition. What confounds Mbembe is that, despite sharing a similar history of suffering and struggle, African Philosophy has failed to take on the reflective attitudes displayed in its counterparts. Conversely, in fact, Africa's focus on the tragedy of its history has prevented African Philosophy from presenting a reflective, deep picture of the human condition.

Does what Mbembe has to say about African Philosophy apply to South African philosophy? I suggest that we treat South African philosophy as a *potentially* distinct tradition. By 'distinct tradition', I mean that the tradition is a recognisable intellectual movement that is not easily confused with other intellectual movements. It is *potentially* so because, arguably, it is not distinct from other traditions, though we may have reasons to consider it as a distinct tradition. I discuss these reasons later, throughout my thesis. If, even though we have good reasons to consider South African philosophy to be a potentially distinct tradition, we cannot show it to be actually distinct from other traditions, then it appears that South African philosophy fails before we even get to the point of comparing it

¹ This is my own term. Mbembe does not label these concerns himself. Praeg (2008) identifies what he calls 'performative principles' which I believe to be the same thing.

with Mbembe's critique. In terms of the methods used in South Africa, South African philosophy is arguably simply an extension of various European Philosophical traditions. Philosophy as it is taught in South African universities is roughly divided into two distinct traditions – 'English' analytic philosophy and 'Afrikaans' philosophy. The English tradition has followed many of the philosophical developments that have occurred in the Anglophone world; while Afrikaans philosophy has followed in the footsteps of Continental traditions. With a few exceptions,² South African philosophy (or its subsets) has in this sense failed to be distinct enough to be considered a tradition worthy of being judged successful. In this respect, at best, South African philosophy is merely a 'colony' or extension of two other philosophical traditions. If we are at all to ask questions about the state of South African Philosophy, conceiving of South African Philosophy in this way will prove to be a futile task.

Yet, there does seem to be a way that we could conceive of South African philosophy as a distinct tradition. If we consider a philosophical tradition as a set of responses to particular problems, then we may be able to conceive of South African Philosophy as a separate tradition. Although South African universities often teach the philosophy that arose in response to European problems,³ the South African context brings with it a series of problems not covered in the standard (Western) philosophy syllabus. These problems include racism, dealing with a history of oppression and the ethics of cross-cultural communication. South African philosophy as a response to the South African context and its problems can thus be seen as meeting some of the conditions to become a distinct tradition. Of course, this should not be taken to mean that all philosophy done in South Africa is South African philosophy – at least not without a substantial argument. Rather, we should take it that, if we are to look for a South African philosophical tradition, it would be found in those writings that respond to particularly South African problems. The concept of ubuntu meets this criterion. Ubuntu came to the fore as a philosophical concept during South Africa's political transition from being an Apartheid state to one which is ostensibly a 'post-Apartheid' state. Ubuntu played a prominent role in providing a theoretical framework for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the several momentous court cases in South Africa. We can therefore see ubuntu as a concept developed in response to the problems found in South Africa. Furthermore, historically and linguistically, ubuntu can only be traced to places and

² For example, Jan Smuts's remarkable, but hardly explored, work on holism: see Smuts, J.C., *Holism and Evolution*, The MacMillan Company: New York, 1924, 1926 (2nd Edition).

³ For example, Descartes developed Cartesian Skepticism as a Christian, idealist response to early Atheist materialism. The structure of Cartesian Skepticism is shaped by the ideological commitments that Descartes had both to religion and a particular form of the scientific method.

languages within Africa. It thus also avoids being seen as an ‘import’ into the South African place. We can therefore be safe in saying that ubuntu is a distinctly African, South African concept. I suggest that we approach this concept as a ‘kernel’ or particularly salient point around which a tradition can be constructed.

Unfortunately for our investigation into South African philosophy’s success, the South African context bears many similarities with other African contexts. South Africa has been the locus of violent oppression, first in the form of slavery and colonialism, and later in the form of Apartheid. Although Apartheid was unique to South Africa to the extent that it was codified in our law, Fanon argues that Apartheid was nothing more than a more blatant expression of the segregation and oppression that characterise all other colonial states (1963). So, we have good reason to see South African philosophy as taking part in the same trends as the rest of the continent. Furthermore, it has been noted in numerous places that African, Bantu cultures are remarkably homogenous. Ubuntu has cognates in languages as far north as Uganda and it has featured in other African countries as a politically useful philosophical concept.⁴ If we are to take the contextual route of defining a philosophical tradition, South African philosophy bears enough significant similarities with the rest of sub-Saharan Africa for us to classify it as a subset of African Philosophy, if perhaps a particularly distinct and interesting one.

Considering the similarities that South African philosophy, especially ubuntu, shares with other African philosophical traditions, one must take seriously the issue of whether or not Mbembe’s critique applies to South African Philosophy. This thesis, then, takes ubuntu as a metonym for South African philosophy. In what follows, I argue that ubuntu has not escaped Mbembe’s criticism, despite having the potential to become a successful philosophical concept. Starting with an exegesis of the failed body of literature on ubuntu, I investigate why it has failed. I then propose a way in which the debate must be reconceptualised for ubuntu to become a successful philosophical concept. This reconceptualisation, however, is meant to apply to South African philosophy as a whole, which for lack of success as a response to the problems particular to South Africa, has failed to become a noteworthy distinctive tradition in philosophy. This does not mean that we need

⁴ For examples of ubuntu appearing in other African places, see Stanlake, J., Samkange, S and Samkange, T. M. *Hunhuism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe Indigenous Political Philosophy*. Harare: Graham Publishing, 1980; and Tambulasi, R. and Kayuni, H., 2005. ‘Can African Feet Divorce Western Shoes? The Case of ‘Ubuntu’ and Democratic Good Governance in Malawi,’ *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 14(2): 147–161.

ubuntu specifically to succeed in order to become a noteworthy philosophical tradition. Rather, by looking at the problems inherent in the debate on ubuntu and by considering a potential solution to these metaphilosophical problems, we should be able to develop *all* debates in South African Philosophy in a way that promises to be philosophically noteworthy. Ubuntu is meant to act as an anchor for this discussion, a symbol which we can manipulate to gain a greater abstract understanding of our position.

The discussion on ubuntu, however, is fraught with problems. In order to write meaningfully about ubuntu, one needs to address these problems – otherwise they will undermine the project from the outset. In this thesis, I use some of the more interesting problems as a starting point for my argument. There are, however, some more basic problems that must be dealt with first. I need to make several clarificatory remarks about ubuntu and how I write about it so that these problems do not undermine the project as a whole. The first remark is about how I will speak about ubuntu, the next remark is about the type of ubuntu that this thesis is concerned with, and the last three remarks are worries that are often raised in any debate on ubuntu.

First Remark: Terminology

For now, I call ubuntu a ‘concept’. A concept, for the sake of this argument, is meant to designate the loosest category of philosophical entities. All critiques, ideologies, ethical codes, values and these categories themselves are concepts as I use the term here. One major problem in the debate on ubuntu is that there is little agreement about what sort of concept ubuntu is. That there is such a disagreement indicates that any classification of ubuntu will need a supporting argument. This I do in Chapter 4. Before I put forward such a supporting argument, a particular conceptual framework needs to be developed. This is because of the problems discussed in Chapter 1. Until then, I use ‘concept’ as a neutral placeholder.

Second remark: Which Ubuntu?

Leonard Praeg notes that there are two things we could mean when we talk of ubuntu.⁵ There is what we can call ubuntu-*praxis*⁶ and Ubuntu-theory. Ubuntu-*praxis* is the lived expression of certain humanistic values. Although we hold that practitioners of ubuntu-*praxis* are expressly conscious of the values informing their behaviour, we would not call ubuntu-*praxis*

⁵ Praeg, L., Postgraduate Seminar Course on Ubuntu, at the Department of International Studies and Political Science, Rhodes University, July to November 2011.

⁶ Praeg specifically talks about ‘*praxis*’. I prefer ‘lived philosophy’. As my thesis will not focus on this form of ubuntu, it is currently irrelevant to try and cash out the differences between the two labels.

a philosophy in the same sense that deontology or utilitarianism are philosophies. This is because ubuntu-*praxis* is not codified in the same way that deontology and utilitarianism are. At most, ubuntu-*praxis* is a lived philosophy, or a worldview in the common sense of the word. Significantly for ubuntu as a philosophical concept, ubuntu-*praxis* informs and gives rise to Ubuntu-theory.⁷ It is thus generally understood that the creation of Ubuntu-theory is the result of the effort to create a *written* form of ubuntu-*praxis*. In South Africa, while we do speak of ubuntu as a normative concept, it is a concept that remains sensitive to its foundation in ubuntu-*praxis*. Ubuntu-theory is thus like deontology and utilitarianism in that it exists primarily as a codified (written) set of norms. For the purposes of analysing the success of South African philosophy, we are not concerned with ubuntu-*praxis*. Rather, when I write ‘ubuntu’, what I am referring to is the philosophical concept – ubuntu-theory – which tries to reflect the normative principles supposedly expressed in ubuntu-*praxis*. So, when I say, ‘Ubuntu is failing,’ I do not mean that South Africans are failing to live up to the humanistic values of ubuntu (though this may be true), but rather that the philosophical concept is failing to be expressed in a way that reveals its philosophical value.

Third, fourth and fifth remarks: Is ubuntu the type of concept we ought to be concerned with? Now, let us turn to the three worries. These worries are grouped together because they are often raised to show that ubuntu ought not to be the subject of a philosophical paper, either because ubuntu is not really a distinctive philosophical concept, or because it is a set of pre-critical and troublesome codified norms. The worries can be cashed out as follows: 1) ubuntu is not a philosophy, but rather a set of obsolete and unattractive cultural norms; 2) ubuntu is inherently essentialist; and 3) ubuntu is simply a universal value expressed in a local language. The first two of these worries have to do with the attractiveness of ubuntu; they can be understood as asking, ‘Is ubuntu *really* the kind of philosophy we want to be doing?’ The last worry is in fact recognition of a problem which is plaguing the literature on ubuntu. This final worry will bring me to the first chapter of my thesis and the problematic context of ubuntu. Despite trying to deal with all these worries here, the second of these worries will continue to be addressed throughout this thesis. The worry is that ubuntu risks being unremarkable if it is not essentialist. The aim of this thesis is to show how ubuntu can be remarkable and distinctive, without being essentialist. In what follows, I will unpack each of

⁷ Praeg, L., Postgraduate Seminar Course on Ubuntu, at the Department of International Studies and Political Science, Rhodes University, July to November 2011.

these worries. Furthermore, while space does not allow me to put these worries to rest once and for all, I will argue that they should not prevent us from investigating ubuntu further.

Third Remark: First Worry: 'Ubuntu is just a set of obsolete norms'

The first worry is that ubuntu is not a philosophical concept, but a set of obsolete norms. Ilze Keevey critiques ubuntu precisely along these lines (2009). For her, ubuntu necessarily entails a set of cultural practices, which include a strict familial hierarchy and patriarchy. She argues that we should be dubious of ubuntu's attractiveness given that it is often associated with cultural practices that are not themselves attractive. Similarly, Mogobe Ramose holds that ubuntu necessarily entails the religious belief in the continued presence of ancestors, or the 'living dead' (2003). Ramose's ubuntu is a quasi-religious concept which plays some philosophical role. Due to its dependence on a metaphysical picture of the world particular to the religious tenets of traditional Africans, this form of ubuntu is highly susceptible to being rejected by others who do not share the same metaphysical picture. If what Keevey and Ramose say is true, then ubuntu loses credibility as an interesting *philosophical* concept. At best, their ubuntu is a concept so particular to a culture that it belongs more to the discipline of anthropology than philosophy; at worst, if their ubuntu is taken seriously as a contender in the philosophical arena of debate, it could herald a step back towards societal structures which have already been shown to be undesirable by feminist and secularist writers. Keevey's and Ramose's ubuntu stops being a concept that non-Africans can take seriously as a contending philosophical worldview.

Although I argue that we should pay attention to *something* about Ramose and Keevey's arguments, it is not clear that ubuntu is *the same thing as* patriarchy or a particular spiritual worldview. Nor does it seem that we should conflate ubuntu with all cultural practices in African cultures. In fact, the exact opposite is true: ubuntu is conceptually distinguishable from its context. An instance that demonstrates ubuntu's conceptual separation from its context is its ability to reform cultural norms. For example, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu was able to appeal to ubuntu as a reason why black South Africans should not engage in retributive justice or violence against others. Evidently, it is not the case that African cultures do not have cultural norms of retributive justice and violence.⁸ One need only look at cases of witch-hunts and necklacing to see that African cultures, like most others, have traditions of violence and retribution. Yet, during the Truth and Reconciliation

⁸ See, for instance, Chabal, *Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling*, Pietermaritzburg, SA: University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Press, 2009.

Commission (TRC), Tutu was able to appeal to ubuntu to reform people's behaviour. This shows that ubuntu is conceptually different from the cultural practices which surround it.⁹ So we should view ubuntu as a concept which is found in a complex and not necessarily consistent set of cultural norms. Therefore, we can judge the merit of ubuntu without needing to call up the contradictory aspects of African cultures.

In this way, ubuntu is similar to the Christian concept of love and Aristotle's concept of the *eudaimonic* life. Both of these concepts exist originally within a complex framework which may not always be consistent or attractive to non-Christians or non-Aristotelians. However, thinkers working within these movements have been able to use these concepts to refine their frameworks. Such was the case when the Anglican Church decided that allowing female clergy is more in line with Jesus' teaching of love than a strict adherence to Biblical patriarchy could be. Also, we have been able to 'export' these concepts from their original contexts. Thus, Martha Nussbaum has been able to use the concept of Aristotelian *eudaimonia* in a modern, liberal framework that Aristotle would probably have found completely at odds with his own philosophy.¹⁰ Ubuntu, it seems, shows the same promise, which is one of the reasons why philosophers such as Thaddeus Metz have been able to apply it to fields such as medical ethics.¹¹

Fourth Remark: Second Worry: Essentialism

The second worry is that ubuntu may be inherently essentialist. There can be no doubt that the concept of ubuntu is often appealed to in this way. Gade points out that some South Africans hold that ubuntu is a characteristic that only black South Africans can have (2012: 495-497). Also when used to bolster nationalistic rhetoric, it is assumed that ubuntu is something that only (some) South Africans can have access to.¹² If this were a necessary aspect of ubuntu, then there would be very good pragmatic and ethical reasons to avoid the concept altogether. Gade (2012), however, points out that there are multiple conceptions of ubuntu. While some are essentialist, there are also both inclusive and exclusive conceptions

⁹ It should be noted that many black Africans feel that ubuntu's injunction against retributive violence and for forgiveness was misapplied in this instance. But this is a separate matter as to whether or not ubuntu is a normative concept.

¹⁰ See Nussbaum, M. 'Capabilities and Human Rights' in *Fordham Law Review* (2007) vol 66(2), pp 273-300.

¹¹ See Thaddeus Metz (2010). 'An African Theory of Bioethics: Reply to Macpherson and Macklin.' *Developing World Bioethics* 10 (3):158-163.

¹² See Gade, C.B.N. (2012), 'What is Ubuntu? Different Interpretations among South Africans of African Descent' in *The South African Journal of Philosophy*, 31(3) pp. 484-503 ; Marx, C. (2002). 'Ubu and Ubuntu: on the dialectics of apartheid and nation building'. In *Politikon*. Vol. 29. No. 1 pp. 49-69.; and Zapiro 'Xenophobia and the Meaning of Ubuntu' in *The Sunday Times*, 25 May 2008.

that do not resort to essentialism. The non-essentialist conceptions of ubuntu see it as a performative feature of a human being; in other words, it is a characteristic which people have solely by virtue of a persistent behaviour. For example, Desmond Tutu tells us that remarking that someone has ubuntu is nothing more than the acknowledgement of a praiseworthy personality trait (1999: 32). Similarly, IsiXhosa speakers with whom I have spoken have often asserted that a person may or may not have ubuntu regardless of their race or place of origin. Ubuntu is therefore an observable characteristic of a person's behaviour. One does not automatically have it by virtue of one's skin colour or culture. Rather, ubuntu as a personality trait must be performed for it to be said to exist. In this sense, Ubuntu is more like Aristotelian virtue than Aryan perfection. Of course, the problem with this explanation of ubuntu is that it does not demonstrate how ubuntu is particularly African. As we shall see later in this thesis, one of the constraints placed on the debate around ubuntu is that its African identity be easily identifiable. As I have said, the aim of this thesis is to show how we can guard ubuntu's African identity, without resorting to essentialism.

Fifth Remark: Third Worry: 'Ubuntu is a Universal Concept in Local Garb'

The third worry is that ubuntu is just a universal concept 'in local garb'. As I have already said, this worry is indicative of a very real problem with the literature on ubuntu, one which I shall call the Problem of Collapsibility. This Problem needs to be dealt with in its own right, and I do this in the first chapter. But we need to deal with a certain bias with Western Philosophy towards concepts from other philosophies: that is that they are simply analogues of concepts already familiar to Western Philosophy. What I propose here is a heuristic shift in bias. Later in this thesis, I develop a more complete argument for why we should not see ubuntu as nothing more than an analogue for concepts already familiar to Western Philosophy. Before I can do this, I need to put a framework in place which happens in Chapter 2. For now, it is just important that I open up the possibility that ubuntu is not analogous to already familiar concepts.

Despite the strong tendency for philosophers to believe that their ideas are universally applicable, we must admit that all philosophy develops within a specific context, or 'culture'. We already recognise this by recognising that Ancient Greek Philosophy is distinct from 19th century German philosophy or classical Chinese philosophy. Of course, philosophy aims at a universal, abstract or fundamental understanding of the world in its entirety and not only its

own culture.¹³ For this reason, any culture's philosophy will see its projects as universal, in the sense that they do and should apply to any given context. Having said this, each culture imbues its philosophy with context-specific aspects. Generally, members of a given culture are unable to differentiate between the 'truly universal'¹⁴ aspects of their philosophy and those that are entirely particular to their culture. This is because both culturally particular and 'universal' aspects of a philosophical tradition appear universal to members of that culture. Similarly, at least some cultures will not have struck upon all universal projects, values and ideas.

While we in the Western, Greco-Roman descended traditions of philosophy have been quick to point out where other cultures have failed to hit upon our 'universals', we have by and large been ignorant of the possibility that many of the 'universals' that we identify are not in fact universal, or that other cultures may have delineated universal values that we have not. Western philosophy is as much limited by the constraints of cultural presuppositions as any other culture. For this reason, the safest starting point is *particularism*. *Particularism* as I use it here is simply the doctrine that each culture's philosophical concepts are particular to it. We may, after extensive comparison, find that there are indeed universal concepts that span the spectrum of cultures, but this is not to be assumed from the beginning. What I propose here is that we grant all claims of *particularity* to each and every culture when investigating its philosophy. For this reason, I suggest that we take seriously the claim that ubuntu is a particularly African concept and not simply a local name for a universal concept.

If these three worries do not undermine talking about ubuntu as a philosophical concept, then we ought at least to take seriously the claim that ubuntu is an African philosophical concept. If it fails as a philosophical concept, it is not for some obvious reason. This is not to say that talking about ubuntu is without serious problems. But I have put forward a case for why we should spend the time trying to resolve these problems – arguing that there is no reason that ubuntu should not hold promise as a philosophically interesting concept. What remains now is to investigate why the philosophical debate on ubuntu has not managed to be widely recognised as philosophically valuable.

¹³ This is admittedly a very loose definition of 'philosophy'. The aim of my thesis is to develop a more precise definition of philosophy, and so a more complete one will arise once from the completed thesis. This definition is merely meant as a starting point. As will become apparent in the course of this thesis, I aim to reject that philosophy can attain a universal understanding of the world, though it can aim at an abstract and fundamental one.

¹⁴ Assuming that universal traits of philosophy do exist, but more on this later.

Chapter 1

One way to see whether or not ubuntu succumbs to Mbembe's criticism is to see how successful it is. This chapter tests ubuntu's success, with the assumption that, if a concept is not successful, then it must have failed. For this reason, we should be clear on what is meant by being successful for a philosophical concept. On a superficial level, we can test a concept's success by how much attention it has garnered from thinkers, academics and the general public. Ubuntu certainly does not fail on that level – at least within South Africa. But, arguably, a concept can be *popular* without being successful as a *philosophical* concept. I will therefore first develop a set of related criteria by which we can judge the success of philosophical concepts.

First, a concept must be *distinct* from others. If it is not, then we are simply not dealing with an independent concept. Our test for its success could just as easily be done by testing another concept to which it is indistinct. If ubuntu is indistinct from other concepts, then we can automatically judge its success as a philosophical concept by looking at the other concepts. If ubuntu fails to be distinct from other, already familiar concepts in western philosophy, this naturally prevents South African philosophy from being successful as an independent tradition.

Secondly, a concept must be *used consistently*. If different authors mean radically different things when they use the same word, we have good reason to believe that the word is either devoid of content (and is thus simply a stopgap for whichever ends or values are deemed desirable by common opinion) or that the authors themselves do not know what the word actually means. If we are unable to use the concept of ubuntu consistently, then there is a serious challenge to any claim that ubuntu is a successful philosophical concept.

Thirdly, writers on the concept should display a meticulous concern for *accuracy*. This manifests itself in reflexive criticism generated within the debate with the aim of perfecting the understanding of the concept and of our relation to the concept. I believe that this is what Mbembe refers to when he says African philosophy has failed to be 'deep' (2002: 240).

Fourthly, the concept must be *interesting*. This criterion is somewhat difficult to explain, though I hope to give some explanation of it in Chapters 2 and 4 of my thesis. For now, let it suffice to say that a concept is interesting when it draws thinkers to investigate it.¹⁵

¹⁵ I favour a naturalistic explanation of interestingness. Objects are primarily interesting because they are somehow relevant to our survival and flourishing. This does not mean that all philosophical concepts must have

If a concept is used consistently and distinctively, has a debate which is ‘deep’ and is judged to be interesting by several philosophers, then we can test it for the fifth criterion: *sustainability*. Successful philosophical concepts are those which have generated a sustained debate. I take it that criteria 1, 2, 3 and 4 are all necessary for there to be a sustained debate – but they are not sufficient. To find out whether or not a concept has generated a sustained debate is an empirical question: we need only to look at the discussion which has arisen and measure its duration and what has been covered in it. It is, as yet, still too early to tell whether or not ubuntu has generated a sustained debate. We can, however, make a judgement on whether or not the concept is *sustainable*. This judgement is speculative: does the concept at hand have the necessary features to give rise to a sustained debate? Here, we make a speculative judgement based on whether or not the concept has met the other four criteria. I take it that if a concept has displayed the first four criteria and has generated a sustained debate, we can say that it is a successful concept.

How then does ubuntu fare against these four criteria?

‘What is Ubuntu?’: Ubuntu’s Failure as a Philosophical Concept

To ask, ‘What is ubuntu?’ is a good entry point into this discussion. How we answer the question is a litmus test for whether or not ubuntu satisfies the first three criteria outlined above: distinctiveness, coherence and depth.

In particular, our answer to this question should be able to show that ubuntu is successful as a philosophical concept. Is there such an answer in the literature? To start with, I discount answers to the question that succumb to the second worry mentioned above. These are unsuccessful for philosophical purposes because they present an answer which is unreflective. Similarly, quasi-religious answers to the question rely on an overly particular metaphysical basis which tends to be unexamined and highly problematic. Yet, even if we discount such answers, we run into problems.

First Problem: The Problem of Collapsibility

Let us start with The Problem of Collapsibility. This problem seems to indicate that ubuntu has failed to be distinct (criterion 1 of our success-test). It has already surfaced as the third worry in the Preliminary Remarks section of this thesis. Although I have argued that we should give African intellectuals the benefit of the doubt with regards to claims of

a directly discernible relation to practical application for them to be found interesting. Instead, they need only have features that indicate *possible* usefulness.

particularity, it may still be the case that ubuntu is nothing more than another name for a concept already familiar to Western Philosophy. So, while I argued that we should change our attitude towards ubuntu in the section on the third worry, it is still necessary to take into account that ubuntu *is* spoken of in a way that does little to mark it out as distinctive. In fact, many African intellectuals often speak of ubuntu in terms that assume an analogy with Western concepts. For some political philosophers and business ethicists, ubuntu appears to be nothing more than soft communitarianism (See for example Eze, 2008; Christians, 2004). For Cornell (2009), ubuntu is synonymous with dignity. For Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, ubuntu is Christian love expressed in the language of traditional African thought (cf. 1999). For Ramose, ubuntu is inseparable from African religion and tradition, and drastically different to any western concepts (2003).¹⁶ There is even a possibility that ubuntu collapses into feminist ethics of care.¹⁷ If one were to view any one of these positions alone, it would appear that ubuntu is nothing new: it is simply a universal idea that has also managed to pitch up in Africa.

The Problem of Collapsibility is perhaps the main reason the third worry mentioned above is often raised in discussions on ubuntu. We are so uncertain about the nature of ubuntu that we cannot differentiate between it and other values and philosophical systems. Only upon viewing the range of views as a whole does it become clear that ubuntu cannot simply be seen as an African ‘name’ for something already familiar to western philosophy. This is because the sheer difference in interpretation indicates an entirely autonomous entity which is merely assuming different guises for different people. So it seems prudent to assume that we are dealing with a concept for which we cannot yet find adequate terms to express it as a distinct idea.

While it is reassuring to know that the literature as a whole indicates that ubuntu is autonomous, the fact that when we try to pin down exactly what it is it collapses into something else is very troublesome. If our answer to the question, ‘What is ubuntu?’ is the same as, for example, the answer to the question, ‘What is communitarianism?’, then ubuntu ceases to be philosophically interesting – it can only be interesting as an example of something already familiar to Western philosophy.¹⁸ The Problem of Collapsibility indicates

¹⁶ Keevey (2009) appears to be of the same view.

¹⁷ Praeg, L., Postgraduate Seminar Course on Ubuntu, at the Department of International Studies and Political Science, Rhodes University, July to November 2011.

¹⁸ One potential (and productive) response to this particular version of the Problem of Collapsibility is to accept that ubuntu *is* communitarianism but is simultaneously distinct from Western conceptions of communitarianism because it is formed within a different debate. I find this response attractive but am dubious of its force. This response leaves open the possibility that ubuntu as a concept is no different in content to another concept

that ubuntu fails to meet the first criterion for a successful philosophical concept. Although this is enough evidence to show that ubuntu has failed as a philosophical concept, it is worth our time to consider another way in which ubuntu fails to satisfy the criteria for being a successful philosophy.

Second Problem: The Lack of Scope

The Problem of Collapsibility shows another problem plaguing the debate on ubuntu. The concept of ubuntu lacks scope. By scope, I mean an understanding of what the concept consists of and what it is able to do. When we survey the literature on ubuntu, we find that an inclusive definition of ubuntu can only be vague to a fault. The literature on ubuntu is scattered across many different disciplines, and lacks a unifying or distinguishing feature, such as a shared vision or shared aims. Indeed, in one brief review of the literature, I came across an anthropological ethno-philosophy,¹⁹ a Kantian-type deontological principle,²⁰ a form of virtue ethics,²¹ a hermeneutic mystery,²² a theological Afro-Christian value,²³ a customary law traditional interpretation of justice²⁴ and a naïve approach to business ethics.²⁵ Within these approaches, there are fundamentally contradictory viewpoints about the nature of ubuntu. Some argue that ubuntu is a necessarily spiritual concept,²⁶ others that it is compatible with our secular Constitution.²⁷ For some, ubuntu is a principle radically incompatible with a ‘modern’ capitalist society,²⁸ for others, it is a way to reform capitalist structures to be more efficient.²⁹ And, of course, there is even debate as to who is able understand what ubuntu is (cf. Gade, 2012). The uncertainty is not superficial: it reveals that we have no practical or meaningful sense of what ubuntu is in any given situation. In our success-test, what I explain here indicates that ubuntu has failed to meet criterion 2: consistency.

already familiar to Western philosophy – it is only its context which marks it as different. Further work needs to be done to show that the context significantly influences the content such that studying only the content of ubuntu is quite different to studying only the content of Western conceptions of communitarianism.

¹⁹ See Keevey (2009) and Ramose (2003).

²⁰ See Metz (2007).

²¹ See Van Niekerk (2007).

²² See Praeg (2008)

²³ See, for example, Tutu (1999)

²⁴ See Cornell, D. (2008).

²⁵ See Prinsloo, E.D. (1998) and Broodryk, J. (2005). I call these naïve because it attempts to portray communitarian ideals and contemporary capitalist business practice as potential bedfellows.

²⁶ See Tutu (1999).

²⁷ See Cornell (2008).

²⁸ See Praeg (2008).

²⁹ See Prinsloo (1998) and Broodryk (2005).

In philosophy there is usually some disagreement about what a concept is, and concepts are regularly used by different philosophical traditions and academic disciplines. It is this difference which drives philosophical discussion. Within rights discourse, for instance, the nature of human rights can be disputed on various levels and different traditions will explain human rights using different philosophical apparatuses. There is usually, however, a degree of consensus about what a concept is and/or what it can be used for. It is this consensus that I call the 'scope' of a concept. So, while we may disagree about the metaphysical basis for human rights, for instance, we mostly agree about their scope; that is, what role human rights should and can play in ethical discourse. When it comes to ubuntu, however, we struggle to be able to delineate a scope for it. The level of discord about the nature of ubuntu shows that it is currently a problematically uncertain philosophical concept. We do not even know, for instance, whether we can properly apply the idea to South African law (cf. Keevey, 2009).

As we shall see, when Praeg (2008) himself approaches the concept of ubuntu, he finds that he can only 'circumscribe' it – that is, he can only give a rough outline of what ubuntu is, and this outline only refers to the context in which we find ourselves when we ask what ubuntu is. Praeg cannot define what ubuntu is at its core. Of course, such *aporia* is not itself problematic for a concept. As Praeg points out, a very similar situation was encountered by Socrates and Meno when attempting to define 'virtue' (2008: 382-383). But the uncertainty surrounding ubuntu is more pervasive than that surrounding virtue. Not only can we not provide a definition for ubuntu, but what we hold it to be is often contradictory in different situations. This may be symptomatic of any concept in the early stages of development, but it nevertheless shows that ubuntu is not yet successful. Despite Mokgoro's claim to 'recognise ubuntu when she sees it' (1997: 2), a review of the literature on ubuntu as a whole reveals that South African philosophers and thinkers do not know what ubuntu is. This problematic uncertainty actually prevents sustained investigation into the concept of ubuntu – different discussants cannot, for the most part, meet their opposing camps in a constructive debate.

Third Problem: The Lack of Depth

There is yet a third problem which undermines the philosophical interest in the ubuntu debate. Most discussions on ubuntu lack 'depth', or sustained, self-reflective investigation into the concept (criterion 3). Mbembe (2002) identifies the same problem in African philosophy in general. He maintains that this is because African philosophy is subject to two

political trends: *Nativism* and *Afro-Radicalism* (Mbembe, 2002). I maintain that the same can be said about ubuntu.

Nativism is a naïve appraisal of an idyllic Africa before it was tainted by the West. In this trend of thought, writers paint a utopian picture of African traditions and heritage, which, they tell us, should be uncritically re-assumed in order for us to solve all of today's social problems. The other trend, *Afro-Radicalism*, sees the African as a Marxian proletariat fighting the imperialist capitalism of the West. Here, the African is painted as the perpetual victim of fate against which she must strive. In both trends, all problems, faults and worrying aspects of African identity and history are caused extraneously and are explicitly *not* the fault of any African agents. Both of these trends, Mbembe tells us, are not primarily motivated by an intellectual interest, but are rather responses to the violent oppression of the past. As such, they are political, concerned with power-relations and posturing. Therefore, neither trend is particularly concerned with accuracy or self-reflection – indeed, too much critical thought could render problematic the historical narratives which they use to justify their actions. Mbembe argues that both selectively portray history and human nature, excluding everything which does not support their grand narrative. While it is arguably important to respond meaningfully to the intellectual oppression of Africa, an uncritical adoption of some or other grand narrative with its selective view of humanity compromises the philosophical depth of debates.

When we try to figure out why ubuntu is plagued by the problem of collapsibility and a lack of scope, I suggest that we should consider Mbembe's critique as a good explanation for what has gone wrong in the development of ubuntu. It is precisely because ubuntu lacks depth as a concept that it can be used in ways that are prone to show the problem of collapsibility and a lack of scope. And, as I hope to show in what follows, it is because the philosophical project of ubuntu is subsumed by a more pervasive political project that it fails to show any depth. As I shall argue soon, ubuntu is subsumed by a sort of nativist project which tries to show ubuntu to be authentically African by claiming it can only be understood by traditional Africans.

These three problems (the Problem of Collapsibility, the Lack of Scope and the Lack of Depth) reveal that our current answers to the question, 'What is ubuntu?' do not sufficiently show ubuntu to be philosophically successful. Ubuntu is generally not thought of as philosophically interesting outside of Africa, except for a few noteworthy philosophers.³⁰

³⁰ See, for example, Bell, R. (2007); and Gade, C. (2010).

Many professional Western philosophers see ubuntu as *just another version of* humanism, for instance, echoing the Problem of Collapsibility. Currently, there is only one article on the otherwise comprehensive online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* that mentions ubuntu: the entry on ‘Africana Philosophy’ (2010) contains exactly one line on ubuntu. There is a similar absence on ubuntu in most other respectable Western works on philosophy. This absence shows that the philosophical interest in ubuntu shown by South African intellectuals has failed to make a mark on the larger philosophical community. Yet, ubuntu has managed to do some astounding work in the areas of reconciliation (with the TRC), punishment (in the abolition of the death sentence³¹) and mediation of interests (as shown in *PE municipality v. Various Occupiers*³²).³³ South Africans and those acquainted with South Africa are able to identify that something extraordinary happened at these events and that ubuntu played an interesting role, even we seem unable to communicate this interestingness to other philosophical communities. So we need to ask ourselves why it that we have not managed to turn an interesting series of events and practices, even perhaps an interesting worldview, into a concept that is broadly recognised as philosophically successful.

Why can't we answer the question, 'What is ubuntu?': Praeg on Ubuntu

Given our failure to show ubuntu to be a philosophically interesting concept, it is worthwhile considering an article which investigates why it is so difficult to answer the question, ‘What is ubuntu?’ Praeg does just this in his 2008 article, ‘What is [ubuntu]?’ Insofar as he answers the question, there are some well-known basics that he is able to give: ubuntu is a social ethic which stresses the importance of the community in an individual’s life. Praeg tells us that it is a characterised by a ‘logic of interdependence’ (2008), that according to ubuntu an individual must recognise his or her dependence on others in his or her action. This is similar to often repeated dictum: *umntu ngumntu ngabantu*.³⁴ Yet, these basic descriptions hardly provide a definitive answer to the question, ‘What is ubuntu?’ Nothing about these statements marks ubuntu as a distinct from other communitarian ethics.

Rather than attempting to show ubuntu to be particular to South Africa, Praeg’s ‘circumscriptions’ detail the socio-political situation that prompts us to ask the question, ‘What is ubuntu?’ And it is this socio-political situation which itself complicates answering

³¹ *S v Makwanyane and Another* [1995] ZACC 3 at 151, 1995 (3) S.A. 391.

³² *Port Elizabeth Municipality v Various Occupiers* 2005 1 SA 217.

³³ Although it is possible to deconstruct the significance of ubuntu in aspects of all three of these instances (see, for example, Marx, C. 2002), when taken as a whole, it is difficult not to see the concept of ubuntu as playing some role in the formation of these extraordinary events.

³⁴ Often translated as, ‘A person is/becomes a person through/by [other] people’.

the question. Praeg tells us that ubuntu is underscored by a series of tensions, which can all ultimately be understood as manifestations of ‘the tension between exaggerated and collapsed difference’ (2008: 370). In his paper, he identifies two of these manifestations: 1) the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar (2008: 368) and 2) the tension between ‘a philosophy of interdependence’ and ‘a belief in our independence’ (2008: 272). It is important to note that the tension here is between the ‘performative’ principles³⁵ (Praeg, 2008) and the actual content of ubuntu. In terms of its content, ubuntu stresses interconnectivity between people and warns against trying to be overly individualistic; yet the performative principles of our context push us to use ubuntu in our rhetoric to underscore Africa’s ‘modernity’, or its identity as an autonomous generator of intellectual and philosophical value (Praeg, 2008, 370). Clearly, the performative principles of ubuntu’s context are at odds with its content. By becoming important specifically within the context of these performative principles, ubuntu’s identity is necessarily shaped by this tension. Yet, Praeg does not see ubuntu’s tension as necessarily undermining the concept’s philosophical value; rather it makes ubuntu much more interesting.³⁶ For Praeg, ubuntu is not inherently distinct from other communitarian ethics – that is to say, its content does not differ from other familiar communitarian ethics; only its context marks it out as distinct.³⁷

I differ with Praeg on two important points. Firstly, I find that the tension he identifies that actually undermines ubuntu’s philosophical value. Secondly, I believe that ubuntu is distinct from other communitarian ethics in terms of content. In this chapter, I show how ubuntu’s philosophical value is undermined by a tension which I identify. Throughout the rest of my thesis, I will build case to show that ubuntu’s content is distinct from other communitarian ethics. Having said where I disagree with Praeg, I must state that I agree with him about the role of context. Ubuntu is notable as a philosophical concept because philosophers who invoke the concept do so conscious that it is responsive to *ubuntu-praxis*. *Ubuntu-praxis*, as lived philosophy, is necessary responsive to context. Context plays a crucial role in how *ubuntu-praxis* is expressed. One of the major problems that arise in the work of Metz, for example, is that his deontological expression of ubuntu appears out of touch with ubuntu’s context as a primarily ‘lived philosophy’.³⁸ Of course, philosophy is not

³⁵ I take it that by ‘performative principles’, Praeg means the contingent political, social, economic and ethical demands placed on writers and thinkers, extraneous to the content of their writing. Performative principles take into account *why* a writer or thinker states something beyond the simple truth value of the statement.

³⁶ Praeg, course on ubuntu, Rhodes University, 2011.

³⁷ Praeg, course on ubuntu, Rhodes University, 2011.

³⁸ Metz is at pains to stress that his work is derived from distinctly African intuitions (2007). However, as I will discuss later in more detail in this thesis (see Chapter 3), I find that Ramose’s criticism of his work (and, more

merely an expression of context – this sort of intellectual activity is more of what we call anthropology. So there appears to be a fine line which the ubuntu philosophical project must walk in order to remain faithful to *ubuntu-praxis* and the practice of philosophy itself. I will explore how to walk this fine line later in my thesis, but for now let us focus on this context.

My Version of the Tension that Undermines Ubuntu's Philosophical Value

As I have stated above, ubuntu has failed because of a tension generated between two performative principles. Although the tension which I identify here is roughly the same as Praeg's, I mean to describe it in such a way that shows how it is fatal to the concept. Central to my tension is the concept of place: the tension arises because of the role that Africa *as a place* plays in the South African debate around ubuntu. I label my description of the tension: the untranslatability-philosophical value tension. Although ubuntu's philosophical value nominally plays a role in the tension itself, we should be clear that both points in this tension are performative principles: what creates the tension here is not the difference between the content (performative principles) of ubuntu and its political constraints. Instead, there is a tension between two political constraints, and this tension undermines the *actual* philosophical value of ubuntu. Ironically, both performative principles arise out of a desire to show ubuntu to be philosophically valuable. Nevertheless, South African thinkers are not being substandard philosophers in allowing this tension to exist: these authors must be sensitive to the constraints placed on African philosophy by a history of intellectual oppression. Not paying attention to these constraints, as I have already said, would alienate their work from the very context that gives ubuntu its content and historical identity. So, we must keep in mind that it is impossible to get rid of the demands placed on ubuntu or to ignore them: they are necessary constraints given the structure of the debate. It is also important to note that these two constraints can be displayed by the same author. In fact, many authors often start by claiming that ubuntu is untranslatable before explaining that it has philosophical value.³⁹ Some may tend to overstate one of these demands over another, but ultimately both must be present in any work that is to be relevant to the situation.

More on Philosophical Value

particularly, of his method) hits the mark: Metz is looking for a Western-style deontological principle (Ramose, 2007).

³⁹ See, for example, Mokgoro (1998).

Before going further, I should give a basic set of criteria for philosophical value. Although I have already given a definition for philosophical success and I hold that it is by being successful that a concept reveals that it has philosophical value, philosophical value is a separate matter from philosophical success, although philosophical value is closely tied to philosophical success in that they share many of the same criteria. A concept has philosophical value when it allows for sustained debate, which in turn indicates that the concept is rich enough for further investigation, is potentially coherent and that it reveals something fundamental about the world and our relationship with it. The richness and sustainability of the debate on a concept depends on the potential for a fundamental understanding. It is generally held that a fundamental understanding of the world is one which is abstract. Naturally, abstraction is defined differently by different philosophers. Yet, most of us assume that abstraction has certain features. Primarily, most of us believe abstract concepts are not contingent. For example, ‘truth’ is an abstract concept that appears to be context-less. So, for now, let us assume that abstract concepts are non-contingent.

My claim is that the tension created between the two politically motivated concerns mentioned above prevents the ubuntu-debate from being sustainable and coherent. It does so by undermining the potentially fundamental understanding that ubuntu could give us of our situation. This is because, as we shall see, we are driven to include ubuntu’s place of origin in the concept’s identity – what generally taken to be a contingent and irrelevant feature of a concept. In what follows, I unpack why we feel driven to include a contingent feature of ubuntu in our writing about it and how this drive undermines the philosophical value of ubuntu.

Performative principle #1: The Need to Validate Ubuntu’s Philosophical Value

Let us start with the philosophical value side of the tension. This demand manifests itself in the desire to assert that ubuntu is a philosophically valuable concept. Moreover, it is the assertion that ubuntu is an *African* concept of philosophical worth. Now, it is worthwhile noting that ubuntu may well be philosophically valuable by its own right. What I am highlighting here is the *desire* that ubuntu be shown to be philosophically valuable. The philosophical value demand arises out of the history of intellectual oppression in South Africa. Praeg explains:

‘The question “What is ubuntu?” emerges in the enunciative space demarcated, on the one side, by the delegitimation of the colonial *a priori* and, on the other side, the ascending legitimation of the post-colonial *a priori* of self-determination. At stake here is the challenge to think Africa’s

modernity, more specifically, to understand the relation between the cultural (a quest for philosophy) and the political [...]. I use the word 'self-determination' holistically to include both the political principle of sovereignty and the cultural logic of authenticity.' (Praeg, 2008, p. 370)

Ubuntu has to succeed as an *African* philosophical concept for political reasons. Both Ramose (2002) and Mbembe (2002) tell how African philosophers must respond to the intellectual legacy of colonialism. Enlightenment thinkers – many of whom we remember for their positive contributions to western philosophy – played an important role in justifying the economic and social oppression of Africans. Mbembe traces the history of this back to Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant, who questioned the rational, and thus human, nature of black Africans (2002: 246). Even once we (as Western-trained philosophers) moved on from such untenable positions, the legacy remained. Africa, it was believed, was intellectually inferior to Europe (Mbembe, 2002: 247). European settlers in Africa maintained that it was their responsibility to educate the black person and bring civilisation to the continent. One must remember that Apartheid, 'Separate Development', only made sense because it was understood that black Africans had yet to develop to the same level as Europeans. The political and economic oppression of black people had to be supported by the intellectual work of the time (Mbembe, 2002). As a result, in the body of works that we often look to as canon for western philosophy, there is also evident a system of intellectual subjugation. So African philosophers find themselves on the offensive. The philosophy as it is taught today in Africa stems from traditions that dismissed them *qua* Africans as inferior; and they must in some sense respond to the denials of their rationality found in the canon.

The demands placed on ubuntu are very different to where Western philosophy finds itself today. The West experienced the intellectual deconstruction of essentialism in the latter half of the 20th century. At least in Western academia today, it hardly makes sense to conflate rational capacity and place of origin or 'race'.⁴⁰ However, African philosophers are not afforded the ability to deal with essentialist claims simply on an intellectual level. Ernst Cassirer puts forward a compelling argument that human beings are in fact symbolic animals rather than rational animals in his *Essay on Man* (1944). His argument appears especially pertinent for African philosophers who find themselves having to deal with a world constructed out of oppressive symbols that pervade every sphere of their lives, rather than

⁴⁰ 'Race' is placed in inverted comma because it has been shown to be a dubious classification of people. The reason why it is mentioned at all is because as construct it continues to play an important role in political discourse today.

simply an intellectual oppression.⁴¹ As a result, African philosophers find themselves having to respond⁴² by appealing to symbols: they need to find a token of their rational worth, or in Praeg's words their 'modernity'. On the face of it, ubuntu shows promise as just such a symbolic token. The success of ubuntu as a philosophical concept (if it can be used successfully) thus responds as a symbol that the denial of African intellectual worth was misguided.

But this project is flawed. On the one hand, African philosophers need to point to a concept that is clearly philosophically valuable. On the other hand, however, they need the concept to be clearly *African*. As I have already said, abstraction is at the heart of our current conception of philosophical value. Praeg points out that part of the demand placed on ubuntu is that of 'self-determination' – the idea that Africa can generate its own intellectual and philosophical value. Part of the ubuntu philosophical project is to validate *Africa* as an autonomous generator of philosophical value. The project therefore assumes the importance of place itself. Abstraction, however, does not commonly allow for place to be important in the identity of a concept. Normally, we take 'abstract' not to include a concept's place. For example, common abstract concepts such as 'truth', 'beauty' and 'goodness' are taken to exist independently of any instantiations of them.⁴³ If ubuntu is abstract (and thus place-less) nothing ties it to Africa and it cannot validate Africa's intellectual heritage. One reason why this is so troublesome is that it undermines the political demand to validate African autonomy. If we exclude place from the description of ubuntu, we are faced with the Problem of Collapsibility. This picture of ubuntu is one of 'Johnny-come-lately' and it hardly expresses the intellectual autonomy that African philosophy strives to display. So the desire to avoid the problems associated with abstraction and communicability, and the desire to conserve the role of Africa in the identity of ubuntu, leads to the 'untranslatability' claim.

⁴¹ One should be careful at this point to note that it is not only African philosophers who need to make use of symbolic reasoning. As Cassirer stresses, *all* humans make use of symbolic reasoning.

⁴² One must ask: 'Do African philosophers *have* to respond to the negative assertions of Western philosophers? Could they not plausibly create a philosophical tradition that does not respond to wrongful trends of thought in the international arena?' While it is important to be critical of the perceived fact that the West sets the tone for discussions, one cannot deny the historical influence of the West on the rest of the world. Because of the colonial expansion of the previous centuries, national boundaries no longer limit the community with which one must interact – and so, African philosophers do not have the luxury of not taking part in the international debate. Furthermore, Biko points out that these negating assertions have become embedded in the black African consciousness (1978). It is necessary to show these assertions to be wrong so that black Africans can overcome the inferiority complex instilled in them by the recent history of oppression.

⁴³ One may argue that we can talk about abstraction without excluding the concept's link to a place. While I agree with this, I find that it is not the standard conception of abstraction. Because it is not standard, it must be argued for – which is what this thesis does.

Performative Principle #2: the 'Untranslatability' Claim

The 'untranslatability' concern usually amounts to some sort of claim that ubuntu has no cognates in non-Bantu languages. It is perhaps best exemplified by Yvonne Mokgoro's famous statement:

'The concept *ubuntu*, like many African concepts, is not easily definable. To define an African notion in a foreign language and *from an abstract as opposed to a concrete approach [is] to defy the very essence of the African world-view* and can also be particularly elusive. [...] In one's own experience, *ubuntu* it seems, is one of those things that you recognise when you see it.' (Mokgoro, 1997, p. 2) (*Italics mine*)

One can find similar 'untranslatability' claims in the works of Ramose (2007), Tutu (1999) and Praeg (2008). Claims which embed ubuntu within certain spiritual frameworks, such as those by Ramose (2003), represent a similar attempt to assert ubuntu's inaccessibility to outsiders. Mokgoro's claim is particularly interesting because, not only does she claim that ubuntu is untranslatable, but she also claims that ubuntu is something that avoids abstract definition. Now, it is important to be clear, at this point I am neither accepting nor denying either of these claims. These two claims are interesting because they play a political role. That is, they reinforce ubuntu's autochthony, or its African identity by claiming that it is obscure to outsiders. One way of interpreting these claims is they both deny that non-partisans of ubuntu culture can adequately understand or express the concept. If other cultures do not have a cognate for ubuntu and it cannot be communicated to them abstractly, then there can be no surer sign that it is truly African.

This claim, however, fails to show that ubuntu is philosophically valuable. Translation and abstraction are the two processes that allow us to communicate a concept's philosophical value to others. While the untranslatability claim assures ubuntu of its African identity, it obscures its philosophical value and 'modernity' (cf. Praeg, 2008) to the outside world. As a result, our assertions that ubuntu is philosophically valuable cannot be affirmed by external observers and our claims about our identity are left unvalidated by larger philosophical circles. More importantly, Africa's response to the intellectual oppression of the past remains unheard, because it cannot be understood.

In Summary

African authors find themselves compelled, on one hand, to validate ubuntu as a symbol of African intellectuality and, on the other hand, to defend ubuntu's African identity. These two 'performative principles' hamstring the debate on ubuntu. While we cannot ignore them, they

prevent us from overcoming the three problems mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. This is primarily because we have been unable to incorporate the concept of place successfully in a concept's identity without undermining its philosophical value. In order to do this, we cannot simply show that place is important for ubuntu alone. Rather, we must show that place plays a necessary role in the formation of philosophical concepts. In this way, we will be able to show that place is necessarily part of philosophical value. By reconciling place with philosophical value, we can start to produce philosophical work that is successful within the South African context. So, our task is first to reveal ubuntu's potential for philosophical value which will, in turn, make it possible for there to be a consistent, deep, sustained debate on ubuntu. Bruce Janz offers us an attractive framework for allowing place to play an important role in the formulation of philosophy, which I will now explore.

Chapter 2

'How can we best establish African Philosophy as truly African and truly philosophical?'

–Bruce Janz, 2009, p. 26

Dealing with the Philosophical Worth-Untranslatability Tension

There are usually two interpretations of a tension. One could either view it as productive or as destructive. A productive tension challenges us to come up with creative responses to the two demands placed on us. It risks being untenable – that is, placing demands on us which we cannot fulfil; but proves not to be untenable after the creation of certain concepts. Creative tensions continue to exist once a solution to them has been created; it is their continued existence that allows for their solutions to remain pertinent and interesting. Consider, for instance, the tension between the value of the individual and the value of a community. Both place demands on us as ethical agents which can often be contradictory. Yet, these contradictory demands have led thinkers to develop various, and often interesting, systems of ethics. Despite these ethical systems, the conflicting demands placed on ethical agents by both the individual and the community perspectives remain. The best ethical systems can hope to do is provide us with a way of negotiating these demands.

On the other hand, a destructive tension is one which is unavoidably untenable. There is no way to meet the demands placed on us by both conflicting elements of an untenable tension. Worse, an untenable tension undermines our ability to comprehend the world: if the tension cannot be solved then at least one element of our world is shown to be unavoidably chaotic and incomprehensible. The result of such a tension is that our ability to make sense of

our lives and their place in the world around us comes into question.⁴⁴ Our response to an untenable tension should be to show either that it is in fact a productive tension by trying harder to find a creative solution or that its presence is the result of faulty thinking at a more fundamental level.⁴⁵ The question then is: Is our Philosophical Worth-Untranslatability Tension productive or destructive?

It may be that we can develop useful responses to the tension outlined in Chapter 1, but we may not even have to do this. The Philosophical Worth-Untranslatability Tension bears at least one important feature that we ought to look for in Untenable Tensions: it is the result of faulty thinking. If this is the case, then regardless of how well we respond to the Tension, we cannot avoid the threat it poses us: that our ability to comprehend the world is fundamentally flawed. My argument that this tension is an Untenable Tension will take the form of an alternative explanation of South African philosophy in which the Untranslatability Claim does not need to be made. The aim is to show that we can preserve and validate the identity of South African Philosophy without resorting to any conflicting claims. Because this project looks at the conditions in which the tension arises, and because these conditions are constitutive of philosophy itself, my claim is that the faulty thinking that gives rise to the Tension lies in how we conceive of philosophy.

Most philosophers have an uncritical view of philosophy itself⁴⁶: even when we examine the nature of our arguments and assertions, we take certain things for granted. Crucially for our current project, philosophers today have a universalistic conception of philosophy. This is not to rule out that many philosophers are moral or epistemic relativists. Rather, it is the assertion that most philosophers assume that the form of critical reasoning is contingent on nothing except, perhaps, human nature. In its non-relativistic form, this claim gives rise to the tension outlined in Chapter 1 by denying that anything that marks ubuntu as particularly African is really worthy of philosophical investigation – thus undermining its African identity. A similar claim could be made by a relativist – one which assumes that human nature is just such that it allows for various different articulations of reason which may or may not be accessible to others. The relativistic interpretation of the universalistic

⁴⁴ For the purposes of this thesis, I am assuming that a fundamental criterion for a good life is the ability, at least in theory, to make sense of our lives, the world and the relationship between the two.

⁴⁵ There remains, of course, the possibility that we have an unavoidable untenable tension. In this case, we are faced with a significant existential challenge, and possibly even unavoidable defeat. In this case, I believe, after we have tried all methods of showing the tension to actually be avoidable, we would most probably have to resort to self-deception or to intellectual hopelessness, where we give up trying to understand the world.

⁴⁶ I take it that philosophers are by training critical of all things brought to their attention. However, not all philosophers spend significant amounts of time analysing philosophy itself. Rather, in order to do philosophy, they must simply take certain things about it for granted.

claim undermines any communication of philosophical value found in the concept to other people groups; this is a similar move to the untranslatability claim. Of course, I have only briefly sketched each of these positions, but I use these sketches to illustrate the type of positions that would give rise to the Philosophical Worth-Untranslatability Tension. Symptomatic of this position is the undervaluation of the role of place in philosophy.

Why place? The tension we are discussing is at heart an engagement with place. As I have already said, part of European domination in Africa was the continual dismissal of Africa as a *place* for philosophy. Although the West has, in some sense, moved beyond the essentialism found in this judgement, the dismissal itself marks African philosophy's birthplace. As I hope to show, it is an unavoidable feature of African philosophy that it must respond to the dismissal of its philosophical worth. The tension arises as a result of the dismissal, first, of a particular place (Africa), and later of place in general as the locus of philosophy.⁴⁷ To argue my point, I will use the conceptual tools developed by a philosopher who has done much to explain philosophy systematically in terms of place: Bruce Janz.

A Contrary View: Philosophy as Contingent on Place

‘The essentialist, spatializing question, levelled by Western philosophy and adopted by many African philosophers, has been ‘What is African philosophy?’, which amounts to ‘Does African philosophy have a right to exist?’ (Janz, 2004c:107)

The Canadian philosopher Janz maintains that thinkers have approached African philosophy from a generally unhelpful and historically oppressive set of assumptions. Janz maintains that the current questions we ask about African philosophy are primarily metaphysical in nature; that is, they look for some essentialist criteria for determining whether a project belongs in the corpus of African philosophy(2009:3-4). In other words, we have been trying to define what *African* philosophy is. The problem with a metaphysical approach is that the overall project of validating African philosophy becomes an essentialist one. When we ask, ‘What is African Philosophy?’ or, ‘What makes a project uniquely African?’ we assume that there exist necessary and sufficient conditions that mark certain philosophical projects as African. Of course, when we fail to find such conditions, the distinctiveness of African philosophy fades. Yet, to deny the distinctiveness not only of African philosophy, but of all traditions of

⁴⁷ It is an irony that Janz picks up on, that when western philosophy assumed the role of place in philosophy, it denied Africa as a locus of philosophy, but later when Africa was able to respond intellectually, the west had moved to a universalistic view of philosophy (2009:233).

philosophy, does not match up with lived experience: namely that we are plausibly able to distinguish different traditions of philosophy based on substantive features of these traditions. Furthermore, any essentialist definition of ‘philosophy’ assumes an uncritical stasis. If, for example, African philosophy is essentially philosophy that uses ‘emotional reasoning’, then any philosopher who questions the role of emotions in reasoning is automatically excluded as an African philosopher. Yet philosophy is precisely that which questions everything, including its own foundations – it is bound to question any essentialist definition of itself. So no essentialist definition of any tradition of philosophy can accurately describe what that tradition is.

Janz tries a different tack. He situates the problem as a ‘phenomenological hermeneutic’ one (2004c: 110; 2007: 690; 2009: 145). Instead of asking for necessary and sufficient conditions for determining whether a project is African or not, Janz asks, ‘What is it to do philosophy in this (Africa) place?’ (2004c: 110; 2009: 7). African philosophy becomes that which falls within a conversation about an African place. This does not preclude asking metaphysical questions about African philosophy, but it does preclude taking them to be the *first* questions we ought to ask about African philosophy. By extension, Janz’s approach applies to all philosophical projects. We could similarly ask, ‘What makes Analytic (as opposed to Continental) Philosophy?’ But this question would be misleading. Rather, we ought to ask, ‘What conversation gave rise to Analytic Philosophy?’ – a question which looks at the place which made Analytic philosophy relevant to a specific group of people. Janz’s call then is for us to do philosophy *within* a tradition, instead of dispassionately regarding the tradition from without.

To explain his approach to philosophy, Janz coins the concept ‘philosophy-in-place’. Janz best explains this concept in the opening and closing chapters of his book, *Philosophy in an African Place* (2009), though it informs almost all of his work for the past decade or so. Philosophy-in-place is especially sensitive to the contingency of all philosophy on the context, or place, to which it responds. Janz holds that all philosophy is done as a response to place, but not all philosophical projects acknowledge this dependence. It is therefore possible for philosophy to be done in bad faith.⁴⁸ Philosophy-in-place is philosophy done in good faith: that is, it is cognisant of the role of place in determining the starting points of philosophical projects but does not see place as determining the entire scope of philosophy.

⁴⁸ I use the term ‘bad faith’ here in a sense that Jean-Paul Sartre would have endorsed. There is a noteworthy similarity between doing philosophy in a way that is ignorant of its dependence on place and the subject who denies the role of her context in determining the type of person she is and the range of choices available to her.

Janz is quite clear that philosophy-in-place is not the claim that philosophy is nothing more than place itself, nor is it a deterministic conception of philosophy (2009: 6). Rather, to use a metaphor from art, place provides the media and subject matter for a painting, though it does not dictate the final shape and quality of that painting. Both media and subject matter can only fit within in a certain range of interpretations – and they often favour some interpretations over others. Similarly, different places lend themselves to different interpretations, and there are some types of interpretations that would be entirely alien to a place,⁴⁹ but knowing as much does not amount to philosophical determinism.

Put another way, philosophy-in-place is the view that all philosophy ‘has contingent but not arbitrary interests’ (Janz, 2009:2). A favourable reading of this statement is that the only way an interest *can gain* the fundamental importance that we ascribe to philosophy is if it relates to our place in a fundamental way. It follows then that all fundamental interests are contingent on place – though, by no means unimportant. Philosophy-in-place is not a predictive model of philosophy. A predictive model attempts to tell us, given a set of factors, what sort of philosophy we might expect in a certain place. Rather, we should understand it as a descriptive model which attempts to find a connection between a current state of affairs and the place which gives rise to them. By being aware of these connections, and the contingency of their interests, philosophers in place are in a better place to produce relevant work and to evaluate the state of the current body of philosophical work.

The main problem Janz finds in African philosophy is that, because of the conversation it finds itself in, it finds itself having to defend its difference to a dismissive and historically hostile outsider (2004c: 107; 2007; 2009: 7). The untenable tension of Chapter 1 is the result of trying to look for an essential quality of African philosophy, exemplified in ubuntu. When we ask, ‘How can we best establish African Philosophy as truly African and truly philosophical?’ (2009: 26), we are looking for essential markers of both philosophical thought and of African identity. The untranslatability claim comes as an attempt to prevent any critical breakdown of ostensibly essential characteristics – at the cost of true philosophical practice. If, however, we grant that ubuntu is African for no other reason than it plays a prominent role in an *African* conversation, we are already part of the way to avoiding the untenable tension. We still need to show that ubuntu does not, apart from its being

⁴⁹ Just because certain questions and interpretations of a place are alien to it, it does not mean that we should not ask such questions about a place. Quite often, these sorts of questions can produce insightful results – something which Janz explores in a 2012 paper, ‘Migrating Texts’. However, we need to be sensitive to the fact that these questions are alien and that they do not lend themselves to an understanding of a place that those within that place would have. Quite often, the interaction between alien questions and a place is more revealing of the place of the subject asking the questions than of the place of which the questions are now being asked.

situated within an African conversation, collapse into other already familiar concepts. Fortunately, Janz's phenomenological hermeneutic approach promises to show how a concept can be substantively distinctive because of its relationship to its place.

For Janz, a distinguishing characteristic of philosophy is that it creates concepts (2011: 178). Concepts are created in order to respond to the (productive) tensions of a place. Now, concepts themselves are not philosophy; Janz compares concepts to the markings of wolves (2011: 175). The concepts we find in philosophical writings indicate that philosophy 'has been here', or that there has been critical reflection about this place in particular. The philosophy itself occurred when the thinker tried to make sense of her place, and the concepts came about because of this interaction between thinker and place. Because each place is different, concepts must be tailor-made to respond to the distinctive tensions of that place. When, for example, Janz compares Feminist and African philosophical writers, he finds that there are many similarities between the two traditions: both have had to deal extensively with the concept of emancipation (among others) (2011:181-182). But, this concept is understood differently by each tradition – it has had to respond to different tensions and has had to be defined differently to suit these particular tensions. As Janz puts it, each concept has a different 'provenance' – that is a different (hi)story of usage or a different track record. As a result, the concept of emancipation in Feminism bears only superficial similarities to the same word in African philosophy, but an African philosopher speaking to a feminist philosopher would soon find that they are using different concepts. So ubuntu may bear superficial similarities to other concepts from other philosophical traditions, but because it has (had) to respond to a distinctive place with its own set of tensions, it is substantively distinct from these other concepts.⁵⁰

Janz's philosophy-in-place gives us a way out of the untenable tension undermining ubuntu and promises to show ubuntu to be substantively different from other, similar concepts. I hope to provide a better explanation of how he does this by examining his concept of place in what follows. But I must make two notes about his philosophy-in-place before I do so. The first is that we cannot apply Janz's concept of philosophy-in-place only in an isolated case. Janz holds that all philosophy is done in response to place, though not all writers may be conscious of this. If we adopt the concept of philosophy-in-place to help us overcome a problem with ubuntu, we must do so for our whole picture of philosophy. So,

⁵⁰ I put 'had' in brackets because I believe we have not yet really applied ubuntu to most of the fundamental tensions and problems in the South African place. Not doing so is part of the reason why we do not seem to be able to talk about ubuntu in any substantive way. In the next chapter, I will outline some of these tensions and problems and propose ways in which we might view ubuntu as a solution to them.

despite my focus on ubuntu, what I suggest here has repercussions for all philosophy, especially in South Africa.

Secondly, Janz explicitly tells us that philosophy-in-place does not amount to a hermeneutics of suspicion (2009: 2). A hermeneutics of suspicion is used to undermine a philosophical writing's (or all philosophical writings') pretence to providing a universal or fundamental understanding. For example, Nietzsche notably posited the Will to Power as the true reason behind many religious and philosophical writings advocating a certain type of morality. He used his hermeneutic of suspicion to cast doubt over the universality or fundamentality of the moral system advocated by these writers. Janz does not mean to cast doubt over philosophical projects. Instead, as I have said, he aims to explain how these projects are in fact fundamental while guarding an experienced, real difference between them. Doing philosophy-in-place means taking the expressed concerns that gave rise to philosophical project seriously (though, it does not mean taking them uncritically).

What, then, is place? And how does it give rise to philosophy? In the following section I will consider Janz's answers to these questions and propose several additions to his work.

Unpacking Philosophy-in-Place: What is place?

Place is a well-explored concept in other disciplines. Disciplines such as geography, literature studies and anthropology have all developed a systematic account of place, partially due to a greater conscience of the influence of place on their disciplines. Each of these systematisations of place is suited to its discipline (Janz, 2009: 11). Philosophy, as I have already said, has generally been thought of as unbound by place. As a result, there are not many philosophers that develop a systematic account of place. Janz attempts to remedy this by considering as many systematic accounts of place as he has come across in various fields. There is not enough space here to consider place in as much detail as Janz does, and to do so in one chapter would be disorientating. Fortunately, Janz's investigation of place has been developed into a systematic account. I am going to present his account of place through three examples. By providing concrete anchoring points, I hope to avoid the confusion and ambiguity that often arises from an encyclopaedic account, such as Janz's which draws on so many different sources. For sake clarity, let us consider the first to examples to be concerned with phenomenology ('What is place *like*?'), and the last one with hermeneutics ('How is place *meaningful*?'). As will become clear, this distinction is purely heuristic, and these two aspects of place are unavoidably interrelated.

1st Example: The Aikido Dojo

The first example of place has nothing to do with ubuntu or African philosophy in particular. I use it because it highlights several important general aspects of place – though it provides an interesting platform for considering more complex aspects of place.⁵¹ Rhodes University's oldest martial arts club is the aikido club. It was founded in 1986 and the current Sensei (instructor) was among the first students in this club. As a traditional Japanese martial art, aikido is practised in a dojo. The dojo is created and treated along traditional Japanese customs. The training area is demarcated by *tatami* or floor mats.⁵² Opposite the entrance to the dojo is the *shomen*, or front of the room. On the *shomen* side of the room, there is the *kamiza*. The *kamiza* is a traditional Japanese display piece, usually with a picture of the founder of the martial art or calligraphy, and several training weapons. Now, the Rhodes Aikido Club shares the room it uses for its dojo with two other martial art codes, and has to put together and take down its own dojo in this room every time there is a practice session. Apart from setting up the room in a particular way, the *place* of the aikido dojo is created through several practices. Upon entering the dojo room, all *aikikai* (aikido practitioners) *rei*, or bow, towards the *shomen*. They *rei* again when they step onto the mat. Before the class starts, the *aikikai* always sit in *seiza* (kneeling position) and wait for the Sensei. When the Sensei wishes to start the class, he first *reis* to the *shomen* and again to the *aikikai*. This happens again at the end of a practice session. All formal greetings, instructions and other etiquette words are in Japanese. Similarly, the students are all required to wear *gi* or white training clothes. The Sensei and other black belt practitioners wear a *hakama* (black skirt traditionally worn by *samurai*) over their *gi*. *Aikikai* are discouraged from wearing their gear outside the dojo. All of these practices (and countless other smaller ones) go into creating a specific place: one where a person may, and is expected to, do a controlled form of violence to another.

In the dojo, one sees the keen interplay between subject and place. According to Janz, place is a component of Merleau-Ponty's concept of the *milieu*.

‘One might take his [Merleau-Ponty's] notion of embodied knowledge as requiring a sense of place for fulfillment. The two together, along with any

⁵¹ In particular, this example is an excellent example of how places can migrate and be replicated in other places. For a theoretical discussion of migration of text (and implicitly concepts) see Janz, B. 'Philosophy-in-Place and Texts Out of Place', in William Sweet (ed.) *Migrating Texts and Traditions*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2012. pp 287-303.

⁵² Traditional *tatami* are made from pressed grass covered in canvass, though the Rhodes University ones are foam rubber.

mediating devices (such as technology) that make the connection between body and place possible, we will call “milieu”.’ (Janz, 2009: 8)

Merleau-Ponty was a proponent of embodied cognition which maintains that cognitive processes (including knowledge) are shaped by their physical context (Cowart, 2005). The ways in which the subject expresses herself, what she knows and understands and all her avenues for action are partially determined by her environment. This environment is a meaning-laden place, and not simply a geographical location. So the subject is formed by her place. The subject, mediated by place, and what she finds valuable and meaningful in her surroundings constitute her *milieu*. The *milieu*, from the subject’s perspective, is a place to which she must respond in a particular way. Her knowledge of how to act is dependent on, and made possible by, the place. In the dojo, an *aikikai* is embodied knowledge: she observes the rules, etiquette and aims of the training space, and is only an *aikikai* to the extent that she does so. So the dojo as *milieu* for the *aikikai* is made up of the *shomen* (to which she must *rei*), the *sensei* (to whom she must defer), other *aikikai* (with whom she must train hard but without causing injury) and the *tatami* (on which she may train, under certain conditions). For the *sensei*, the dojo as *milieu* consists of *aikikai* (which he must instruct), as well as other elements which he may view differently to his students. Both *sensei* and *aikikai* embody knowledge differently but they are responding to the same place. Their *milieus*, or how the place appears to them, are slightly different, but recognise the same place. Janz cites Malpas, who holds that place is the ‘basis for agency’ (Janz, 2009: 12). All particularities that make a particular subject who she is, and that provide her with the raw material on which she is to work her agency, are found in place. Without place, one has only an abstract subject for whom everything is possible and therefore nothing is definite – a subject whom we can say nothing about. As Janz puts it, ‘To be human is to be in a place’ (2009: 11).

But we should not understand it simply that place forms the subject. Subjects create places. When considering at what level places become meaningful, Janz tellingly considers the individual as the potentially smallest meaningful place (2009: 13), revealing that the subject herself is the centre around which a place is constituted. Of course, places are accessible by more than one person – an intuition that African philosophy takes to be very important – and it may be more useful to consider them as intersubjective, rather than subjective entities. But the point remains: places are subject-dependent. What makes a place a place is that it is meaningful to a subject. ‘Our places have as much to with the narratives, histories and practices we attach to them as with the geographical features’ (Janz, 2009: 22). Places are partially constituted by social roles and practices; when these social roles and

practices are disrupted, we get a sense of ‘placelessness’ (Janz, 2009: 17). Janz explains that a place is formed by practices that we associate with that place: for example, a street is just that which we continually walk and drive along (Janz, 2009: 22). So the dojo as a place becomes just such a place precisely because of the way the *aikikai* and their sensei treat it: in short, an aikido dojo is the place where aikido is practiced. As I have mentioned, the Rhodes dojo is shared with several other martial arts clubs. When they use it, it is no longer an aikido dojo, but it becomes a different place. The aikido dojo is delineated by our actions (practices, etiquette, training drills) within that place. Where we sit when we *rei*, the direction that we *rei*, how we treat other *aikikai*, the actions we refrain from and the language we use, all determine the specific set of human and spatial relationships that make a dojo. Similarly, all other places are the product of human action. What makes a town, a country, a region, a home or a place of worship is the repetitive and continual set of behaviours and social roles that occur in those places.

Events that disrupt these social roles, disrupt the place and reshape it. After such events, such as war or revolution, a new set of practices arise as response to the disruption and a new place begins to be formed. There is, therefore, a constant interplay between subject and place: subject and place create each other dialectically (Janz, 2009: 8, 15). This is not to say that subjects are free to create whichever place they desire. Places are ‘viscous’ (Janz, 2009: 217, 2011: 174). That is to say, places retain something of their previous formulations. I will return to this aspect of place in the next example. For now, all that I need to stress is that the subject must change a place incrementally, and in doing so she changes something of her own subjectivity.

Along which lines does the subject interact with a place to form a *milieu*? Janz suggests that we form our *milieu* around the questions of, “‘What we are loyal to,” “‘what we care about,” or “‘what matters”” (2009: 17). Place then is a value-laden landscape, where the subject identifies features that are important to herself. Conversely, there are also features of certain places that a subject would not notice. When we describe a place, it becomes important to pay attention to what subjects in that place take to matter – and what features they do not notice. Subjects identify what matters in a place through a memory of previous interactions with the place at hand and other places. From this, we can see that the particular starting point of a place is far less important than continuity between previous formulations of a place and our current one. Within the Rhodes aikido dojo, certain areas gain a specific importance to *aikikai*. The *shomen* is one such area. By the *aikikai*’s actions she designates

this area of the dojo as having a specific importance.⁵³ In the case of the dojo, what matters about the *shomen* is somewhat arbitrary – there is nothing that makes a *shomen* meaningful except that *aikikai* have agreed to treat it as such. This is not to say that all meaningful features of any given place are arbitrary or merely the result of some agreement. Rather, the point is that places are constructed out of a set of meaningful features which subjects interact with in such a way that shows them to be meaningful. What identifies a subject as being *in place* is that she is able to identify these features as meaningful.

As I have said, when the practices which constitute a place are disrupted, we get a sense of ‘placelessness’. Disruption may come in the form of war, invasion, catastrophic natural events and other immensely violent events; but it can also come with the passage of time (such as when one revisits a hometown several decades after leaving it), or when one encounters subjects who are not familiar with a place. When the subject sees a place as placeless, that place becomes chaotic, meaningless or even threatening. For the *aikikai*, the dojo during another training session is meaningless; the symbolic features of the dojo that she recognised in her own training place are not present in this one, and she does not know how to respond. A more extreme case of this is a country that has been invaded. Janz uses the example of Africa during colonisation and the exodus of African slaves to illustrate placelessness (2009: 225-226). The Africans in these places experienced a violent and often pervasive disruption of the behaviours which constituted their places. They felt a disconnect between the place they were currently in and the place they once knew. The latter was the one in which they had embodied knowledge and were acquainted with as a *milieu*. The disrupted place of colonised Africa was one which Africans did not know how to navigate at first, and which continued to be threatening to them. Janz calls the violent manner in which these subjects have been made to feel placeless ‘alienation’ (2009: 226).

Janz suggests that a sense of placelessness and alienation needs to be overcome by ‘re-presenting’ the place (2009: 17). By situating the new, ‘post-disruption’ place within a narrative, subjects reassert their ability to identify those features of their place that are meaningful to them (thus also reconstructing their *milieu*). Janz is careful to make it clear that we cannot re-appropriate our place by simply analysing and observing it (2009: 17). As it is part of our embodied knowledge and is constituted by our actions, we need to re-enact it

⁵³ *Aikikai* treat the *shomen* with respect. I have already mentioned that all *aikikai* and their sensei will *rei* to the *shomen* at the beginning and end of class. On top of this, it is imperative that the sensei stand between the *aikikai* and the *shomen* when he instructs, so that the *aikikai* face the *shomen* while being instructed. *Aikikai* are instructed not to turn their backs to the *shomen* if they can help it during practice sessions. These and a few other points of etiquette designate the *shomen* as a meaningful area within the place of the dojo.

(Janz, 2009: 17). Yet, by retelling and reformulating our place, we in fact change our place. The texts which we use to ‘re-present’ our place become part of our place, changing its meaning. Janz writes, ‘ideas come from places, and at the same time are *constitutive of those places*’ (2012: 297-298, *my own italics*). Place then is never static, but changes whenever we attempt to create or sustain it. Philosophy-in-place is a practice⁵⁴ which enacts a place. By doing philosophy-in-place, we designate the important features of a place as we continually return to them as features worthy of our attention.

The dojo, and all other places, is dependent on the presence of a subject that can read it in a particular way; this points to the fact that places are also dependent on time (Janz, 2009: 9). The same geographical location where the place of the Rhodes aikido dojo exists at certain times in the week becomes other places during other training sessions, and to other subjects. 200 years ago, the geographical location where the dojo currently stands was an entirely different place, and it will be an entirely different place 200 years in the future. Thus, the dojo is bound to flicker in and out of existence, only when certain people are present in it (Janz, 2004a: 87). Gilles Deleuze writes, ‘the only subjectivity is time’ (2005: 80). While this statement might be wrong in its absoluteness, it points to the inextricable relationship between the subject and time. If place is dependent on the subject, it follows that it exists within time. Janz notes that Heidegger was sensitive to the relationship between time and place, especially since he moved his focus from time to place as a basis for subjectivity (2009: 6). To better explore the relationship between place and time, let us consider the second example of place: the old border post into the former Transkei Bantustan.

2nd Example: The Old Border Post

The Apartheid government set up Bantustans as reserves where black Africans had to live unless employed by the white-owned economy. By ensuring that Bantustans were small and had very few resources, the then Government was able to make sure that black people would be forced to find work in the white-dominated urban centres of South Africa. The Apartheid government ostensibly aimed at giving Bantustans a form of independence under the guise of ‘separate development’. This independence was nevertheless nothing more than a façade as leaders of these Bantustans were South African state employees. Four Bantustans actually

⁵⁴ Janz argues that philosophy is a practice and not a set of texts (2012: 289-292). He asserts that there are no philosophical texts – only philosophical questions that we can ask about those texts. But, by the same token, we can ask anthropological, historical or literary questions of the very same texts – thus reading them without doing philosophy. What makes a text philosophical is the questions a reader asks about it. Key philosophical texts are those which lend themselves more easily to philosophical question, much like a sheet of musical notes would lend itself towards instructing a musician to play music (cf. Janz, 2012: 290).

attained a nominal independence: Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei. The Transkei is located just north of East London, with some coastal access but no viable ports. With the declaration of independence in 1976, all amaXhosa residents of the Transkei lost their South African citizenship and were treated as foreign nationals by the South African Government. Because the Transkei was nominally independent, a border post was set up on the N2 highway that links Cape Town to Durban, to regulate the movement of people. Although white people would have had to report to the border post, it was well understood that the post was there more to keep black South Africans in than to keep white South Africans out. The building where this border post is remains today, as a coffee shop and *padstal*.⁵⁵

Although Janz, following Marc Augé, remarks that airports and other places of transit are something of a ‘non-place’⁵⁶ (2004b), there are good reasons to examine this border post as a place. ‘Place is space invested with symbolic meaning, and that meaning becomes inscribed in a variety of ways, ranging from highly codified or ritualized ways to very fleeting ways’ (Janz, 2009: 22). The border post into the former Transkei is itself a symbol of the devastating bureaucratic machinery that enforced Apartheid in South Africa. As Apartheid was a formative historic period, the border post provides an excellent example of place’s interaction with time. Janz mentions two temporal features of time: provenance and trace. Let us explore each of these in turn with reference to the border post.

Concepts, like wines, have a provenance (Janz, 2011: 177). To say this is to admit that concepts were developed in response to a particular place. But concepts, like texts, can migrate, and when they do, they change the place to which they have migrated (Janz, 2012). To ask what the provenance of a place is, is to ask from whence come the concepts and practices that have been inscribed on that place, or that have formed that place (Janz, 2011: 177). We must be careful here: provenance is not the same as ‘origin’ (Janz, 2011: 174). Questions about origins often bring with them a sense of cultural purity, and can be grounds for rejecting concepts and places as *allochthonous*, or foreign. Cultural purity does not admit that places change over time and that they interact with each other, leaving the concept of cultural purity at best hopelessly unable to describe the actual state of the world and at worst xenophobic. Provenance is rather concerned with the entire passage of a concept. When we

⁵⁵ Afrikaans and South African English for road stall.

⁵⁶ Airport terminals, according to Marc Augé (1995), are constructed out of symbols which all reference other places. They are thus places whose sole purpose is to get us to another place, and therefore not a place one can dwell in.

ask the provenance of a concept, we ask where it has been and how each place it has been has changed it. In this way, it is similar to Geuss's description of Nietzsche's genealogy (1999).

The Transkei border post has an interesting provenance insofar as it represents a major theme in South African history. Border posts as a concept come from the rise of nationalism in Europe. Where border posts have been built, they have been a way for humans to inscribe on a place the concepts and ideals of nationalism. So the Transkei border post points back to the invasion of European ideologies in Africa. As another step in this genealogy, the border post also in a sense came from Apartheid as a nationalist ideology, which itself modified and added to the nationalism(s) present in Europe. Notable among its addition, was the insistence that 'nationhood' be determined along 'tribal' lines and its enforcement thereof through a policy of Separate Development. On a more local level, it calls to mind the first instance of a racially defined border in what has since become South Africa. When Jan van Riebeeck landed in the Cape in 1652, he erected a hedge in present-day Kirstenbosch to separate 'white' Cape Town from the 'black' rest of Africa. With this hedge, he and the Dutch East Indian Company took possession of the Cape in true European fashion – with a border, a flag and state bureaucratic machinery. The reason for this separation was to legitimate the exploitation of Africa, by creating a national as well as racial Other in Africans. The bureaucratic machinery, the presence of State flags and arbitrary border line at the Transkei border post arise out of a genealogy which included Van Riebeeck's hedge. And, although many of the amaXhosa in the Transkei may not have been aware of the hedge in Kirstenbosch, they were certainly aware of the role that these apparatuses played in legitimating their exploitation. Through its provenance, the border post came to represent oppression to the amaXhosa in the Transkei.

But provenance is not only backward-looking (Janz, 2009: 18). The provenance of a place captures the sense that all places symbolically represent the *passage* of time, including the present and the future. The Transkei border post has since become a coffee shop and has fallen into disrepair. There are visible marks of the passage of time on the place. In its disrepair, it represents the continued *present* state of poverty in the region. The lack of repair points to a despair about the future. So present in the same place are clues about people's relationship with past, present and future.

Places can be understood as narratives. Janz talks about tradition as a form of place, one which is best viewed set of meaningful symbols or a *narrative* (2004c: 114). For understanding how place displays the passage of time, it may useful to investigate how we see places as narratives. Narratives presuppose time and thus embody the provenance of a

place. Even when things recur, they do so over a period of time. Janz talks about places being organised by *topoi* (2009: 223). *Topoi* are recurring themes in literature: for example, the ‘fallen hero’ or the ‘*plaasroman*’.⁵⁷ A productive way of viewing place is that the symbols inherent in a place are arranged according to *topoi* – that is, symbols in a place tell a story about that place. The Transkei border post is a symbolically rich structure; it embodies several *topoi*. For instance, one *topos* that we have already discussed is that of segregation to justify exploitation. Another would be the *topos* of an oppressive government: the Apartheid government created the building in order to subjugate a people group – the hostility of the people working there and of the bureaucratic system it dispensed, the presence of police who violently (and often arbitrarily) enforced racially based oppression, the visible difference in the economic state of either side of the border; all of these combined to form a story of oppression. Many of these symbols persist today, telling of a continued state of oppression (dubbed ‘economic Apartheid’ by some). The border post thus represents the past and its effect on the present in the form of a narrative with recurring events and themes.

The narrative-like nature of place allows us to consider another feature of place: trace. Janz speaks of places as texts which can be read (2009: 21). In this way, all places can be thought of as a crime scene. Crime scenes contain different traces of the events that happened in them. Some of these traces are blatant (e.g. the blood stain on the wall), others less so (e.g. depressions in the carpet where the murderer stood) and still others are hidden (e.g. the cricket bat meticulously cleaned and returned to the closet). The traces in a place form part of the symbolic network from which we derive the meaning of a place. There are traces of practices (e.g. the old railings that marked where people would queue at the border post) and traces of events (e.g. bullet holes in a wall). There are even traces of previous formulations of a place, such as written and oral stories that include the Transkei border post as a place that divided families or robbed people of their right to citizenship. People who are familiar with these formulations, events or practices are able to read their traces in a place long after they have passed. Another example of a trace-rich place is a deconsecrated church. Those who are familiar with Christian practice would be able to read the traces of the previous religious place; but someone from another culture entirely would have trouble deciphering the relevance of the features of the building.

Up until this point, I have been discussing place in terms of subjectivity. *Milieu*, practice, provenance and trace are all closely tied up with subjectivity and each other. We do

⁵⁷ Afrikaans for ‘farm novel’ – a recurring theme in Afrikaans South African literature of the 20th century in which there is a journey to the idyllic and morally pure life in the countryside.

not experience each of these as separate – rather they are all part of subjectivity, and the experience of place. In this way they constitute the phenomenological part of Janz’s analysis of place. But there is another approach which we can use to understand place: a hermeneutic one. The hermeneutic approach focuses on place as a text to be read. Now, it must be made clear that, when it comes to place, these two approaches imply each other. Throughout my summary of Janz’s phenomenological analysis of place, I have had to speak of place as a meaningful text. Even when we look at trace, we are forced to consider place as something which can be ‘read’. Similarly, considering place as a text necessarily implies phenomenology. A text is only a text insofar as it can be read, and what we are reading here is a world which we as subjects are continually and collectively creating. So, my distinction between Janz’s phenomenological and his hermeneutic approaches is only a heuristic one, meant to give a greater understanding of his project. Now, to investigate Janz’s hermeneutic approach, let us turn to our third example: Grahamstown.

3rd example: Grahamstown

Grahamstown is a very small city with around 80,000 inhabitants. Despite its size, unlike my other two examples, Grahamstown is a complex place: it consists of many smaller places, has existed for around 200 years and observed by multiple different people, each of whom sees it differently.⁵⁸ Therefore, I cannot hope to give an adequate description of it in the limited space of a philosophy paper. Nevertheless, by discussing certain aspects of Grahamstown, we are able to provide illustration for some of Janz’s more important, hermeneutic concepts of place.

Like most of South Africa’s smaller towns, Grahamstown is strongly racialised: there are ‘white’, ‘coloured’ and ‘black’ parts of town.⁵⁹ These divisions also reflect the economic inequalities of the town. Grahamstown then consists of many smaller places. Janz calls these smaller places ‘*topemes*’ (2009: 13-14, 223-224). Janz arrives at the concept of the *topeme* by asking, ‘What is the smallest intelligible unit of place that is intelligible as a place?’ A *topeme* then is a relative concept; *topemes* are the parts of a whole that is determined by the conversation we are currently taking part in (2009: 231). These parts, of course can be thought of as wholes themselves. For instance, Grahamstown consists of various districts, one

⁵⁸ Admittedly, this last factor is true for the other two examples. The reason why it is more significant here is that the range of different perspectives is so vast we can no longer speak of individual types and are now forced to consider principles for explaining and coping with this difference.

⁵⁹ Although these are no longer as strongly enforced as during the Apartheid era, one finds that few people actually challenge the habitual practice of living in an area that was formerly classified as belonging to ‘another racial group’. There are thankfully some exceptions to the rule, but they remain exceptions.

of them being Rhodes University. But Rhodes University itself can be thought of as a whole place which consists of smaller place, i.e. faculties, departments, residences and support facilities. As with symbols in a place, Janz states that *topemes* are arranged according to *topoi*, or narrative themes (2009: 223). So there is a story that is commonly understood about how Rhodes University relates to the rest of Grahamstown. Similarly, part of what makes Grahamstown the town that it is (and an exemplar of the South African condition) is just how the different racialised areas of Grahamstown are thought to relate to each other. The *topoi* that arrange these *topemes* are ones of inequality, privilege and segregation as they have been enacted in Grahamstown's history.

Although Janz makes it clear that place is in part tied to an actual geographical location, the *topemes* that go into making a place may be places that are not commonly thought of as located geographically. At one point, Janz talks of 'race' as a *topeme* in both the Kenyan and the South African place (2009: 226). It is not readily apparent, but race and other identity markers are places that are geographically located. How race is understood differs in various parts of the world; the identity marker is manifested in different ways even between two African countries such as South Africa and Kenya. In South Africa, as Grahamstown illustrates, race is literally inscribed in our urban planning – race and place of habitation become nearly synonymous.⁶⁰ Although Kenyan places are influenced by a concept of race, it is different there primarily because there are many fewer white Kenyans and because it was never as radically segregated as in South Africa. Race is such a prominent feature of the South African intellectual place precisely because it is concretely expressed in our lived place. Although a white South African and a black South African may occupy the same larger place (Grahamstown), there is a very real sense in which they occupy different smaller places. At the very least, we can say that their *milieus* are vastly different – what is seen as comfortable and beneficial to one may appear threatening to the other precisely because of the *topoi* of Grahamstown.

How do these smaller *topemes* relate to Grahamstown as a whole, meaningful place? Janz considers this a question of *aggregation* (2009: 14-15, 224-229). He compares place to language – both consist of meaningful packages which in turn are made from simpler meaningful packages (2009: 223). Like language, the meaning of a larger place is not simply the aggregation of its constituent parts (2009: 232). Rather, places present themselves as irreducible wholes (2009: 14). The meaning of a sentence is only partially dependent on its

⁶⁰ Fortunately, there is some change in this rule in larger urban centres.

constituent parts – to derive the full meaning of an utterance we need to look at context and intention. Similarly, although the *topemes* contribute something to the meaning of Grahamstown, they only tell part of the story. As we have discussed, the provenance and narrative of Grahamstown would play another part in determining its meaning as a unit of place. How Grahamstown relates to the Eastern Cape as larger place and to other constituent parts of the Eastern Cape is yet another part of how its meaning is created.

Janz maintains that conveying the constituent parts of a place (even if one managed to convey *all* the constituent parts) one would not be able to convey the place itself. This is because, to some extent, places are unavoidably particular (Janz, 2004b). In this way, a place may be thought of as like a person. Janz does not make this connection, but the analogy seems fitting. There are reducible, communicable elements of a person – her ‘facts’, so to speak – but knowing these does not amount to knowing the person being described. People, like places, have a provenance/history, bear scars/traces and have relational identities, such as being someone’s mother.⁶¹ The analogy is useful for envisioning how being acquainted with the meaning a place has is not reducible to knowing its features. To know Grahamstown, one has to have been there and spent some time there. But the analogy is not complete. Places, unlike people, consist of smaller units that are themselves places (*topemes*). And places, unlike people, are partially determined by the conversation that is being had.

What makes us group certain places together? Janz mentions how Mudimbe highlights that most Africans did not think of Africa as place until they came into contact with non-Africans (2009: 233). Prior to this, they thought of their place along more local lines – our family/tribe’s place *versus* another family/tribe’s place. Africa became a place worthwhile talking about when Africans entered into a conversation with non-Africans.⁶² How Africa came into being as a unified place reveals an important aspect of place – it is determined by the conversation in which we are using it. Or rather, the scale at which we consider our place depends on who our interlocutor is and what our intention is. “‘Place’ is a malleable term’ (Janz, 2009: 230). We may focus on different levels of place: the house, the suburb, the city, the province, the country, the continent, or even the whole world. For example, Janz explains that African and Africana⁶³ philosophy are vastly different (2009: 224-229). African and Africana philosophy do not agree on many things, including on how

⁶¹ Places are also partially defined relationally, e.g. ‘It’s near X,’ or ‘This place is so unlike home!’

⁶² The term conversation is potentially misleading. The way I use it here is inclusive of a whole range of interactions from the mutually beneficial to the blatantly oppressive and exploitative. The emphasis is simply that there is a transmittal of concepts and a having to deal with someone who is Other.

⁶³ Philosophy generated by the African Diaspora.

they define the scale of their place, and even tend to focus on different issues. Yet, there are times when we would want to consider them as occupying the same place – one of having to respond to the denigration of black bodies, the systematic oppression by European powers and the western dismissal of African intellectuality. At other times, we may want to consider them separately, or even at more local levels. Similarly, when we look at Grahamstown, the scale at which we consider place depends on the conversation we are having. Even when we are talking about where we are from, we adjust our answer accordingly. One might identify with a region of Grahamstown when talking to another Grahamstonian (Grahamstown is too large a place), with Grahamstown when talking to another South African (Grahamstown is a place) or with South Africa when the person does not know the country (Grahamstown is too small a place). This is not merely a matter of etiquette: although the boundaries of Africa are determined by a conversation, they have a very real impact on the way we investigate place. Africa becomes a place worthy of investigation because of the way it has been treated in the past.

In part, we determine how big this place is by comparing it to what it is not (Janz, 2009: 16). Place, unlike a text, is closely tied to who we are: place grounds identity (Janz, 2009: 16). And as with identity, places become crystallised when they are contrasted with places that are decidedly not the same. Liminal identities and places are those which challenge the ‘us/them’ distinction (Janz, 2009: 16). In Grahamstown, Rhodes students occupy a liminal place. In one sense, they are definitely part of Grahamstown – it is, after all, a university town. Yet, in another, almost all of these students are foreign. They tend to be socially liberal in a socially conservative town. They do not form part of the Grahamstown community. Most importantly, almost all the students are not originally from Grahamstown. In a town where many families can trace their living in this land well into the 1800s and even earlier, whether you and your family are *from Grahamstown* is an important feature of your identity. In the case of Grahamstown, however, the liminal position of being a Rhodes student has been accepted by the community as part of the place of Grahamstown. But this need not always be the case: currently, several African nationalist leaders claim that gender-queer individuals are ‘un-African’. Arguably, people tend to exclude liminal places and identities when they feel threatened. Despite the tendency to want to homogenise place around one identity or narrative, ‘places are never univocal,’ Janz tells us (2009: 232). There may be dominant portrayals of a place, but there are usually also minority portrayals which challenge the *milieu* of the dominant. Middle class Grahamstonians would, for example, see Rhodes as a symbol of Grahamstown’s development and educational significance in the

region; impoverished Grahamstonians would identify it as a place that they cannot go, and possibly a symbol of oppression. Part of what makes a portrayal of place dominant is that it sets the topic for the discussion on place. Minority voices may disagree about what is said, but they constantly find themselves having to respond to the dominant voice. This disagreement, of course, forms the outline that determines the shape of African philosophy, as discussed in Chapter 1 (also see Janz, 2009: 233). Doing philosophy-in-place is to be sensitive to how the borders of a place are defined and disputed (Janz, 2009: 234).

According to Janz, 'Deleuze argues that heterogeneity is productive' (2009: 236). When people disagree about a topic, they are forced to develop critical ways of analysing them. This, of course, becomes the basis for philosophy. Janz uses Deleuze and Guattari's concept of intensity to explain how this works. Intensity, he says, works like the anode and cathode in a battery (2009: 236). The difference between two narratives about a place forces us to explain why such difference can exist and how we ought to deal with it in daily life. By looking at the different views of Rhodes in Grahamstown, we are challenged to explain how such difference arises and how we as academics ought to respond to people with different views to our own.

Janz calls being sensitive to place and the different views of it 'listening and speaking'. He expressly avoids the term 'dialogue' as it often implies a dominance from without – much like the 19th century missionary or colonial officer who set the tone and topics of the 'dialogue' with the 'natives' (2009: 242-243). Listening and speaking acknowledges that by taking part in a discussion about a place, one plays a role in how that place is constructed. But, as hermeneutic principle, it requires that the participant in this conversation let go of his preconceptions. Janz emphasises that listening and speaking requires us to be sensitive to the critical structures used by people in that place to evaluate their own place (2009: 244). As academics brought up in a western tradition of philosophy, we tend automatically to categorise questions into epistemology, axiology, ontology and methodology (Janz, 2004c: 105). While there may be something useful about doing this because it brings *new* insights about a place (see Janz: 2012), it closes us off to engaging with the philosophical tradition of that place. This is not a call for us to do ethnophilosophy, or to only do African philosophy as some sort of uncritical anthropology. Instead, Janz asks us to take part in a two-way critical engagement with place. To do philosophy-in-place, we need to find out 'what matters' in a place and work within the critical structures of that place to engage with these topics. As with any discipline, it is possible to work within the critical structures available to challenge and redefine them. But this should not be done assuming that

the critical structures of one place ought to act as the standard for another. Although Janz does not say it, what he outlines here amounts to academic humility.

Janz offers a very rich account of place. In the above section, I have given examples of place to provide an exposition. Figure 1 provides a summary of this exposition. Before we continue to use place, there is one question which I should attend to before moving on: Is place still applicable in a digital age, where geographical location no longer limits our scope for interaction? There are two responses currently available to this worry. The first is that the world is (and will probably remain) only partially digitalised. While the internet may be reaching more and more places, there are still many places where internet access is not prevalent. Furthermore, it seems barring all humans actually being plugged into machines, we will continue to occupy and need to move through geographically located places. The second response is to say that Janz's concept of place can be adapted to virtual places. It is very telling that we tend to talk about online locations in terms of place: we *visit* a *website*, we *go* from one page to another, we *navigate* or *surf* the web, ask people to *leave* or *get off* our Facebook pages. The online world is a *virtual* place onto which it seems that we transpose our embodied knowledge of geographically located places. Of course, this needs further investigation, but the point remains: we are more than capable of adapting the concept of place to online places.

Philosophy-in-Place: How Does Philosophy Relate to Place?

Up until this point, I have aimed at just providing an exposition of place. This exposition is nowhere as comprehensive as Janz's own understanding, but it provides us with a working model to begin discussing philosophy-in-place. Because Janz redirects the conversation towards phenomenological hermeneutics, we can safely expect that he sees philosophy as being primarily motivated by phenomenological and hermeneutic questions. But what are these questions and what distinguishes them from the questions that drive other disciplines forward? In the last section of this Chapter, I will discuss what exactly philosophy is, how it relates to place and what we can expect from philosophy-in-place.

As I have already said, Janz believes that philosophy is a 'response to a question or a set of questions' about place (2009: 217). But something more needs to be said about these questions – after all, one could ask the very same questions about place as an anthropologist. Throughout his book (2009), Janz contrasts philosophy with anthropology. The main difference between these two disciplines is the level of criticality. Anthropologists document people and their engagement with place; such documentation aims at preserving a set of

views, rather than critically engaging with them. Doing philosophy-in-place, we are rather to engage critically with the place at hand. When I ask, ‘What is it to do philosophy in this place?’ what I am actually asking is, ‘What (sorts of) questions are better going to help me understand this place?’ Janz canvasses several historical answers to this question:

‘One way of distinguishing between pre-Kantian European philosophy, Anglo-American analytic philosophy and post-Kantian European philosophy [...] is to recognize that the first would identify a truly philosophical question as one which strives for a universal, the second would see a truly philosophical question as one which aims to clarify language, and the third would define a philosophical question as one which shows forth the potential and the aporias of a life-world. Are these questions mutually exclusive? I do not think so [...].’ (2009: 220)

Given these three definitions of philosophical questions and the nature of place as discussed above, I would like to propose a broad definition of philosophical questions. Philosophical questions are those that aim at fundamental understanding of our place, and provide us with a rational way of coherently integrating this understanding into our broader intellectual being. By fundamental understanding, I mean an understanding of the principles at play in a place. These principles and how we represent them are thus an abstraction from place, where place provides us with the material to refine into principles.⁶⁴

Place, however, is not merely raw data. By analysing place, we run into a peculiar problem. Place, as I have mentioned, necessarily involves the subject. So an investigation of place is one which also investigates the subject. For this reason, Janz identifies the types of questions we ask about place (philosophy) with what Gabriel Marcel calls ‘mysteries’ (Janz, 2009: 13). Mysteries are problems that necessarily implicate the subject and which are not open to be solved by means of a replicable technical process where all that matters is the end result (Marcel, 1950: 4-7). By contrast, ‘a mystery is something in which I am myself involved, and it can therefore only be thought of as a sphere where the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning and initial validity’ (Marcel, 1949: 117). The way we approach a mystery is thus the same as we might understand therapy: it is personally tailored and more emphasis is put on undergoing the process than the end result. Indeed, we may never come to satisfyingly complete answer to a mystery; Collin McGinn, for instance, argues that the mysteries of philosophy are in principle unsolvable because we have

⁶⁴ In principle, this is a view of philosophy that assumes particularism – but that allows for a *de facto* universalism. However, it follows that if we find that all principles for all places are universal, we can only do so after having investigated all places.

not evolved the capacities to do so (1993). Philosophy then is the ‘therapy’ we undergo to help us understand our place at a fundamental level.

Philosophy is at its core a phenomenological project – one which is aimed at ameliorating the place-bound, embodied subject. The questions we ask in philosophy are aimed at resolving the tensions of our place (Janz, 2011: 178). In doing so, it changes our place (and to some extent our *milieu*). In particular, philosophy leaves concepts behind as traces of our action, and these concepts become part of the new place (Janz, 2011: 177-179). As I have said, these concepts are merely markers of the philosophical process. Ubuntu is one such concept. But, in keeping with Janz’s wolf scent-markings analogy, I have argued that ubuntu is a half-digested concept – a sign that the ‘wolf’ with which we are now dealing is not digesting things properly. At some level, we as African philosophers are not processing our place properly. In order to diagnose what is wrong with our wolf, we need to better understand the process of digestion. In other words, we need to look at how philosophy ought to refine a place and where we are falling short of this process.

Janz provides a model for the abstraction of place in his treatment of Lefebvre. Janz uses Lefebvre’s distinction between ‘perceived space’, ‘conceived space’ and ‘lived space’ (2009: 223-224). (Janz writes in such a way that he takes Lefebvre’s ‘space’ to signify the same thing as his ‘place’.) Perceived space consists of our practices within a place. This equates to Praeg’s notion of *praxis*, or a set of actualised principles embodied in daily behaviour (2011). We already have a perceived space in ubuntu-*praxis* which I discussed at the beginning of this thesis. Conceived space is how we conceptualise our place. It is highly abstracted, places very little emphasis on the subject and tends towards an universalisable picture of a place. A successful philosophical concept should operate at the level of conceived space. Lived space is how we represent our place through symbols, narratives and pictures. Lived space mediates perceived space to conceived space. Philosophy typically happens at all three of these levels. The problem with African Philosophy is that it does not have much work in the realm of lived space (Janz, 2009: 224). Either African philosophers practice ethnophilosophy or they look at African places as universalisable. For example, Tutu (1999), Ramose (2003) and Keevey (2009) are engaged more in philosophy at the level of perceived space, documenting expressions of ubuntu; while philosophers such as Marx (2002), Metz (2007) and Praeg (2009) work primarily at the level of conceived space, dealing

with ubuntu as an abstract concept that itself can be subjected to analysis.⁶⁵ What is needed is a critical appraisal of African places and the questions they generate. With ubuntu, there needs to be more critical investigations of how ubuntu explains our place(s).

Because of this lack, we are faced with a sense of alienation – that is, an inability to read the South African place. In other words, because we have failed to ask fundamental questions about the mysteries of the South African process, we have not been able to produce philosophical work that resolves the tensions and mysteries of the South African place. As a result, our philosophical work is lacking, concepts such as ubuntu lack clout and, ultimately, we are compromised as subjects. For ubuntu, or any other South African philosophical project, to be successful, it must start by attempting to resolve the mysteries of the South African place. By using ubuntu to produce meaningful explanations and ways of dealing with our mysteries, we simultaneously give the concept scope and develop a defining corpus of work which can be further analysed to produce the critical depth with Mbembe points to as missing in African philosophy (2002). In the following chapter, I turn my attention to these mysteries.

⁶⁵ Admittedly, this thesis's project falls within the range of the latter group, because what is being conducted here is metaphilosophy which treats ubuntu as concept as the focal point of the investigation.

Chapter 3

Re-imagining Philosophy

Janz's philosophy-in-place requires us to rethink all philosophical projects. To do philosophy-in-place, one must reconsider how philosophy relates to the concrete world, specifically to places that already exist. The current predominant assumption of philosophy is that it reasons about abstract universal concepts, which are not contingent on any place. These concepts include both ideas ('truth', 'racism') and methodologies ('deontic principles', 'reflective equilibrium'). We may find examples of these concepts in particular phenomena, but philosophy is traditionally only concerned with such particulars insofar as they give insights into the nature of the abstract universal concepts they embody. The way we speak about philosophy reveals our bias towards this understanding of philosophy: ethics, for example, has an 'applied' branch, suggesting that the principles exist before the application. Philosophy-in-place in fact requires that we work in the reverse; that is, from the particular to the universalised. In this chapter, I have three aims:

- 1) To provide a framework for how particular phenomena in place give rise to philosophy;
- 2) To argue for (1) by analysing particular phenomena in South Africa (thus providing introductory remarks for South African philosophy); and
- 3) To argue that working with a universal-to-particular (as opposed to a particular-to-universalised) model of philosophy has been unproductive for South African philosophy.

These three aims are interdependent. If I hold (1) to be true (as I must if I am to argue for it), it is necessary for me to start with a particular example. Doing (2) provides us with a particular example: philosophy in South Africa. (2) is the core aim of this chapter: *prolegomena* for South African philosophy. (1) and (3) provide a foundation for (2): (1) provides a theoretical structure for (2); (3) does the necessary negative work to show that traditional conceptions of philosophy are flawed. (2) is designed to act as a catalyst. (For a

summary of this, see Figure 2). In this chapter, I ask questions that I argue should direct philosophical projects in this place. These questions themselves can be changed, but the underlying point remains: South African philosophy needs to develop its own conceptual framework for understanding its place.

This chapter does not provide an argument for relativism. Relativism, as an opposing view may take it, would make critical conversation between places impossible. Instead, the particular-to-universalised model of philosophy I am advocating here promotes a more rigorous method of forming universalised philosophical concepts – one which takes into account the role that place plays in forming all philosophical concepts. Such universalised concepts (such as human rights) become applicable across the board not for any reason other than the brute fact that humans tend to communicate concepts and to homogenise as they have greater lines of communication, as is the case today.⁶⁶ The end result of communication between philosophers from various places – the universalised conceptual framework – bears the trademarks of a universal concept. Both universal and universalised concepts are assumed to be useful for explaining multiple particular phenomena in different places.⁶⁷ Both can be used as a normative standard when assessing the moral calibre of particular actions. But the particular-to-universalised model is explicit about dependence of all concepts on place. For example, while we may be able to analyse particular states of affairs according to human rights, if we take the above model seriously we must concede that the terminology of human rights is a response to a particular place. We are thus only able to use the terminology of human rights if we are conscious of the place(s) from which they have come, the place(s) which have changed them and the place(s) to which they are being applied (in other words, the *provenance* of human rights).⁶⁸ Not to be explicit about the provenance of concepts is to allow for the false assumption that a given feature of a concept that is in fact dependent on a particular place would hold for all other places. As I will argue, not being conscious of the provenance of a concept is to assume (often wrongly) that what mattered in the place where the concept was formed matters in the new place in which it is being used.

Let us turn to what is required by doing philosophy-in-place. The basic particular-to-universalised model of philosophy implied is as follows:

⁶⁶ This is not to rule out the possibility of another, metaphysical reason for our creating universalised concepts, but for now this brute, and basically observable, fact provides sufficient explanation.

⁶⁷ Note: not ‘regardless of place’.

⁶⁸ For example, human rights have their origins in Ancient Greek thought, were revived during the European Reformation and later during the 18th and 19th centuries to justify revolutions, and were used later as a response to the horrors of the Second World War. Currently, human rights are being used to monitor international relations.

- 1) Start with a particular phenomenon* in a particular place,
 - 2) Develop a conceptual framework for dealing with* the particular phenomenon,
 - 3) Use conceptual framework to understand similar phenomena in the same place,
 - 4) Refine the conceptual framework to be able to represent significant features of phenomena in this place,
 - 5) Repeat steps (1) to (4)
 - 6) Compare the conceptual framework with others that deal with similar phenomena in other places;
 - 7) Develop a *universalised* conceptual framework to account for multiple particular phenomena;
 - 8) Adjust the universalised conceptual framework as one encounters new particulars.
- (*I will clarify these terms shortly).

Obviously this is a very simplified model which will be expanded in this chapter. It is a normative ideal – and not a complete explanation of how we form philosophical concepts. As I will argue later, it is impossible for us to do (1) simply; we will always have a hermeneutic bias, informed by concepts either at step (3), step (6) or step (7). We can nonetheless hold this model as an ideal: one which we can modify our action to resemble more and more closely. Steps (1) to (5) happen within a single place. Only from step (6) should we consider other places. The product of step (7) is the universalised conceptual framework which in some ways resembles the abstract universal of traditional philosophy. Traditionally, philosophers have been largely ignorant that they go through steps (1) to (5), and have tended to see their work as going in a reverse direction – from a universal to a particular.

Let us consider an example of a potential particular-to-universal growth of a concept. Writing in the 1960s and 1970s, Steve Biko sought to understand relationships between black and white people. In particular, he wanted to explain why black South Africans deferred to a minority white population, and why white South Africans took for granted their position in South African society. We can identify this deference as the phenomenon that Biko started with, or his (1). In order to explain the black-white relationship, Biko came up with the concepts of the black inferiority and white superiority complexes. These complexes explain the psychological conditions which allow the oppressive power-relations of Apartheid to persist. As an engagement with a particular phenomenon in a particular place, these complexes are at level (2) in the particular-to-universal model above. At this level, they are very particular, local explanatory concepts, meant only to explain a particular phenomenon. Now, Biko could move outwards, applying his concept of the inferiority-superiority

complexes at a different phenomenon in the same place, such as the relationship between coloured and black South Africans or gender relations in South Africa. As he does this, he would find that he would have to adjust the concept slightly each time to account for the particularities of each phenomenon. By applying his concept to more phenomena, we are able to start universalising Biko's inferiority-superiority complexes as a method of analysis. Finally, we would want to 'export' Biko's concept to other places, using it to understand race and power relations in the USA or immigrant-local relationships in China. Sometimes the concept will have to be adjusted to fit new data – perhaps inferiority/superiority complexes manifest themselves differently in different places. Each time, the concept is adjusted so as to account for both previously encountered phenomena and the current phenomenon. This process amounts to a more abstract (and less particular-dependent) explanation that can be given by the concept. Of course, we may find that some phenomena simply avoid being explained by the concept, but this is not a problem for the concept unless it purports to provide a unified theory of everything.

Why start with a particular phenomenon, in a particular place? As I have already covered in the previous chapter, places are structured around what matters. The significance of a phenomenon – how it matters and what components of it are salient *in this place* – is determined by the relationship that the particular phenomenon has with all other features of a place. It stands to reason that any conceptual framework meant to deal with a particular phenomenon must be designed to take into account how it matters in its place. Being structured so as to highlight what matters in a particular place is arguably what is called the 'logic' of a conceptual framework. When we use a concept not from the place of the phenomenon we are considering, we risk using the 'wrong' logic – that is, a structure of thinking that highlights links with other phenomena in the place and with the place itself which would not be taken to be 'what matters' by people in that place.⁶⁹ When we start with the phenomenon at hand, we are sensitive to the salient features it has in its place. We are therefore more capable of developing an accurate understanding of it.

The class of phenomena that motivate us to do all philosophy are what Gabriel Marcel calls 'mysteries' (1949; 1950). A mystery is a kind of problem which:

(a) implicates⁷⁰ the subject, and

⁶⁹ It should be noted that using the 'wrong logic' in a place could be productive and a good way for people to explore their place. However, this should not be the preferred method with which we analyse a place as it does not deal with what matters to people in a place.

⁷⁰ Marcel uses the term 'implicates'. I take it that he means the subject matter reflects directly on how the subjects conceive of herself in both an ontological and ethical way.

(b) Because of (a), resists any solution which does not take the subject through a process.

By process, I mean a series of actions which must be followed in a particular order to reach a result. Marcel argues that following a process is essential to philosophy, unlike pharmacy for instance where the patient need not re-create all the steps necessary for producing the drugs she is to consume. I would like to add a further criterion to Marcel's framework:

(c) A mystery undermines our ability to form a coherent understanding of our lives in a place.

Mysteries are problems without a current solution. That such problems exist points to our inability to structure values or phenomena in such ways that create meaning, and it challenges our ability to understand and live in our place. In other words, mysteries threaten our ability to form a *milieu*. By undermining our ability to understand our place, mysteries threaten our access to the good life. One of the requirements for a good life is that one is able to find meaning in one's place, or 're-present' it in such a way that reveals what matters (cf. Janz, 2009:17-18). The converse, that one is unable to meaningfully represent one's place, is a situation which we recognise as being chaotic and traumatic. Janz holds that being unable to understand one's place is a symptom of the dispossession that Africans underwent through colonialism and slavery, what he terms 'alienation' (2009: 17-18).⁷¹ A phenomenon thus becomes a mystery by the way it compromises our ability to make sense of our place. (c) gives us a motivational explanation for why we engage in philosophy at all: philosophy is the process we undergo when we are confronted by features of our relationship to place which undermine our ability to understand ourselves (in our place) or our place itself, in order to re-create a meaningful understanding of our place. It should be made clear that mysteries do not only become apparent to philosophers, in the same way that diseases do not only affect doctors. Rather, mysteries make philosophy a healthy engagement with place for people, and trying to solve mysteries constitutes all philosophy.⁷²

In response to mysteries, philosophy creates concepts which allow us to understand mysteries in such a way that we are able to develop a meaningful narrative about our place (Janz, 2011: 178). Instead of this understanding being 'abstract' and 'universal', it is 'fundamental' – that is, it picks out the way phenomena relate to each other in this place and generates rules for behaviour based on these relationships. Thus, philosophy aims at a

⁷¹ One may be able to identify a similar disconnect in white South Africans who now perceived the government and legislature of the country as antagonistic and closed to their desires.

⁷² It follows that professional philosophy is just the refinement of what most people would do when faced with a disjunctive understanding of their place.

fundamental understanding of mysteries. Like tensions mentioned in the last chapter, mysteries are not simply solved; rather we need to incorporate them into our rational understanding of the world. I take it that understanding is the process of incorporation. Unlike a universal understanding, to have a fundamental understanding we must take into account the contingent (but significant) features of the place under scrutiny. Our aim in doing philosophy in South Africa is to:

- d) Gain a fundamental understanding of the place(s) and its mysteries; and
- e) Develop rules for behaviour based on the understanding gained in (d).

South African philosophy's first aim, then, is to delineate the mysteries of this place.

I cannot cover all these mysteries in this chapter. So, instead, I have chosen to start the discussion by proposing an overall structure for these mysteries, starting with the most prevalent and central problem of our place, and then relating other significant ones to it. The first mystery, the fragmentation of the South African Place, is one which I take to affect everyone in South Africa. It problematises any analysis of the South African place. It is also the direct result of a history of violent and forced migrations in this place. The fragmentation of the South African place is primarily manifested through the divisive racialisation of people groups, and so a discussion on the mystery of fragmented place in South Africa must include a discussion on the mystery of race. However interrelated these two mysteries are, they are also distinct, so that a conceptual framework meant to deal with the one may not necessarily deal with the other. I situate fragmented place as the foundational mystery which has given rise to the other South African mysteries. The next mystery one must discuss here is our inability as academics to rid ourselves of our hermeneutic biases when analysing this place. This mystery compromises our being able to approximate the normative ideal laid out above. It also problematises any attempt to write about the South African place. As this is a prolegomenon, I do not aim to give any answers to these mysteries, but mainly to set them out.

One might ask, 'How does this relate to ubuntu?' I have, after all, started this thesis with ubuntu as an anchoring point for the argument laid out here. Ubuntu, I shall argue in the last chapter of this thesis, has been a particularly interesting concept in South African because it promises to be able to give us either a fundamental understanding of some of these mysteries, or because it gives us rules for behaviour considering these mysteries, or both. It has failed to do so because we have had the wrong conception of philosophy, expecting ubuntu to cope at the level of steps (6) and (7) of the normative model above before it had successfully undergone steps (1) to (5). If we are to see ubuntu thrive as a South African

concept, we must allow it to cut its teeth on South African issues first and foremost. This does not mean that ubuntu is the *panacea* for South Africa's mysteries. It is rather to be understood that its success is part of a Hegelian dialectic. In Hegel's understanding of philosophy, a thesis is proposed (e.g. ubuntu), and in response an antithesis immediately becomes viable. These two concepts eventually merge, after significant modification to each, to form a synthesis, which itself becomes a new thesis. Ubuntu is merely a contender for understanding our place, and its successful formulation will allow for other, contradictory formulations to be proposed. In order to do any of this, we must know which mysteries these concepts must respond to, and hence the subject of this chapter.

The Foundational Mystery: The Fragmented South African Place

The expressed aim of Apartheid was 'separate development', which was achieved through the forceful separation of places. Apartheid itself was a distillation of segregationist ideologies of the first part of the 20th century (See Worden, 2000; Guelke, 2005). The tendency towards the segregation of place can be traced even further back, to Jan van Riebeeck's hedge which marked the division between the *European* Cape Colony and the 'rest of Africa'. Given this history of enforced divisions, it should not come as a surprise that Xolela Mangcu is able to remark on the lack of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 'civic religion', or commonly held public values which are meant to bind a society together, in South Africa (2001). Mangcu's essay (2001) highlights the fragmentation of the South African place. Without a civic religion, the concept of a distinct and distinguishable South African place becomes questionable. Janz remarks that places are not simply the aggregation of their composite *topemes*, but instead holistically meaningful entities (2009). When we look at the South African place, however, it appears that the only meaningful sense in which we can talk about the South African place is as an aggregation of smaller, conflicting places. The fragmentation of place is the root mystery in South Africa: it remains easily discernible and is pervasive throughout the country. It is worthwhile considering how this fragmentation came about before attempting to describe it in further depth.

South Africa has, since before its creation as a state in 1910, contained a number of different people groups. As place is a social construct, places formed around these people groups, dictated by their internal informal logic. As can be expected, these groups have gone through periods where they peacefully interacted and shared each other's places, and periods

where they sought to homogenise their places through the expulsion of others.⁷³ However, by the 20th century, the white colonial state began gearing its policies solely towards segregation and the homogenisation of place. The Natives Land Act, 1913, marks a definite turn towards the segregation of place: it set aside semi-autonomous reserves for black South Africans and limited land acquisition by black South Africans to only these reserves. By 1948 and the implementation of formal Apartheid, the overall tendency was to homogenise place. This was done on two levels and through two different types of policies.

On the formal level, Apartheid was a set of laws which enforced homogeneity of place. The formal level of Apartheid is characterised by the laws passed under the Nationalist government, and the legal basis for it was relatively easily undone by repealing the Apartheid laws in 1991.⁷⁴ However, the formal level fostered a set of attitudes and patterns for social and business interactions which are more pervasive and innocuous. Mangcu recounts how, growing up as black boy in King William's Town, white people's conscious and unconscious actions communicated his inferiority and otherness to him (2001: 16). These othering attitudes were conveyed through subtle features of interactions: the language and register one used to talk to someone, the suspicion one regarded another with when they entered your store for the first time, attitudes towards bodily contact. Similarly, I came across a spoken account by a former domestic worker who told how her employers would not let her use any of the household cutlery and crockery; she remarked that even the family's dog used a better plate than she had. The result of this more subtle Apartheid has been a cluster of psychological scars, including what Biko terms the black inferiority and white superiority complexes ([1978] 2002). Informal Apartheid has proven to be insidious and difficult to overcome as it consists of countless little actions that cannot be regulated through the law.

While Apartheid was created on both the formal and the informal levels, it was enforced through two types of actions: one created and emphasised difference, the other prevented difference from being diminished. The Population Registration Act, 1950, codified the racial categories into law, elevating apparent 'racial' differences to the central defining

⁷³ We tend remember the periods of homogenisation (e.g. Shaka's *Mfecane* and the Great Trek) over periods of inclusivity (the formation of District 6, the Sophiatown cultural life and the periods of peaceful coexistence between the amaXhosa and the Khoi-San peoples). A balanced history should take into account both these trends.

⁷⁴ It is necessary to note that despite Apartheid laws having been repealed, the direct effects of these laws have been difficult to overcome. For example, the Group Areas Act, 1950, is no longer in effect, but the areas designated by this act for a particular racialised group remain occupied by predominantly the same racialised group today.

feature a person's being.⁷⁵ The Bantu Education Act (1950), the Group Areas Act (1950) and the Bantu Authorities Act (1951) were among the laws which aimed at creating separate and homogenous places. The Group Areas Act is of particular interest to us as it created geographically discernible places along racial lines: one can thus see it as the central act in fragmenting the South African place. So, while identity has elsewhere been seen as a social construct which is independent of a physical place, in South Africa the social construct of racial identity became inextricably linked with geographically discernible places. This makes Janz's emphasis on place particularly desirable for South African philosophy: the intense racialisation of South Africans is bound up with concepts of place. A significant feature of how race is constructed in South Africa is that we take racialised groups⁷⁶ to be associated with particular places, such that we can today meaningfully talk about 'black' and 'white' places.

Despite emphasising apparently inevitable differences between the racialised groups, the South African government had to acknowledge that racial categories were not naturally clearly distinct. The South African government subscribed to a combination of two different forms of racialism: one being the pseudo-scientific biological determinism popular in the English world and the other being the Herderian notion of divinely mandated separate peoples ('*volke*') (Dubow, 2010).⁷⁷ In both cases, the government had to ensure that either doctrine was not disproven. Acts such as the Immorality Acts (1927, 1957) perpetuated the myth that racialised groups were the result of some natural order (biologically or divinely mandated). Acts such as the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (1953) were designed to prevent mixed places from forming. The existence of stable and prosperous mixed places would bring into question the belief that

⁷⁵ It is noteworthy that, despite the Government's best efforts to perpetuate the myth that race is a real and unchangeable feature of a person's identity, it had to put in place a system whereby people could apply to have their official racial classification changed. This was partially motivated by the fact that often people of the same biological parentage would be placed in different categories. What is further remarkable is that most of the recorded applications to have one's racial category changed actually succeeded. For a detailed discussion on this process, see Guelke (2005: 25-27)

⁷⁶ It should be apparent that the most relevant feature of race in South Africa's history is that it was socially constructed. Regardless of any biological differences, what is most striking about the South African example is the social and legal lengths the Government went to to instil the belief that races are biological and deterministic features of the world. (Blum provides a convincing argument as to why it makes no sense to talk of biological differences using racial categories (2010)). Because of the need to emphasise that race is a social construct, I am borrowing Blum's term 'racialized groups' (2010) while preferring the South African convention of using the '-ise' suffix.

⁷⁷ Dubow explains that the Afrikaans population were wary of the biological explanation of race for two reasons: 1) it espoused a Darwinian evolutionary schema which is at odds with the strongly Calvinistic beliefs of the Afrikaans; and 2) the scores of Afrikaners in psychometric tests held in the 1920s were statistically indistinguishable from their black counterparts, despite English speakers faring remarkably better (2010). Biological racialism therefore did not support the political aspirations of the Afrikaners at the time.

racial segregation is divinely mandated or an essential feature of the world. Thus, the Government also had to destroy places where different racialised groups were peacefully coexisting. District Six remains the foremost example of a pre-Apartheid place where racialised groups coexisted peacefully and often prosperously. By destroying mixed places, the Government stunted the development of inclusive places and set exclusive homogeneity as the social norm for South Africa. Today, South Africans view places formerly designated for other racialised groups with distrust: white South Africans today remain by and large wary of formerly black areas, seeing them as crime-ridden and mysteriously threatening. Furthermore, the effects of these laws persist in how today's South African places are formed: 'black', 'white' and 'coloured' places are readily discernible, especially in urban places. Apartheid then has been unfortunately successful in creating a fragmented place.

Let us focus on this: the fragmentation of the South African place has become a geographical division of place. This division is not simply along racialised lines, but includes differences in access to resources and to economic wellbeing. The aim of Apartheid was to structure South African society such that there was a large pool of low-income unskilled and semi-skilled labour (Terreblanche, 2002). In order to do this, the Government sought to restrict access to land, and thus to restrict access to the means of being economically independent of the colonial labour economy. Similarly, the Group Areas Act pushed many black Africans out of urban centres and forced them to live in townships on the outskirts of towns and cities, thus limiting their access to work opportunities in urban centres. By limiting access to land, the Government vastly hindered black South African's access to the economic means of survival and self-improvement.⁷⁸ The result is clearly visible more than twenty years after the collapse of Apartheid: urban and rural areas are divided into wealthier 'white' areas, middle 'coloured',⁷⁹ and 'Indian' areas, and poorer 'black' areas. As recently as 2009, the World Bank rated South Africa as having the highest inequality between rich and poor, and the 2011 Census found that different racialised groups fall into different earning brackets, with white South Africans earning as much as five times as much as their black counterparts (2012: 42). One of the main reasons for the maintained segregation of racialised places is that they coincide with economic ability: poorer black areas provide their inhabitants with fewer resources for economic improvement and so prevent them either from leaving the area for a

⁷⁸ Terreblanche terms this process 'pauperisation' and gives a far more detailed description of it in South Africa in his book (2002: 31-44).

⁷⁹ The term 'coloured' in South Africa denotes a racialised group descended from the Malay slaves of the Dutch East India Company, their Dutch masters, the Khoi-San peoples and black African labourers. They have since formed a distinct culture, such that the term does not refer merely to 'mixed race' people, but to people whose parents are also coloured.

richer one or from changing their area for the better. The mystery of the fragmentation of the South African place thus refers to divisions along race, geographical location and wealth lines. These divisions and the traces of their provenance are pervasive, informing every aspect of life in South Africa as South Africans self-identify primarily by their racialised group. Due to the policies of Apartheid, and to a far lesser extent to Black Economic Empowerment, South Africans associate racialised identity with economic means and are continually reminded of the conflation of race, place and wealth in numerous daily actions.

To summarise the above, I have sketched out how the South African place is deeply divided along racialised, economic and geographical lines. How should we approach this fragmentation of place? There are two types of philosophical projects that can be conducted regarding a mystery: the first aims to understand it, and the second considers ways of living in a place that has it. Often, these two projects imply each other, such that conducting one project necessarily relies on conducting the other. Following Janz, I suggest that we avoid favouring a metaphysical approach to the mystery for the first project. It is clear that the fragmentation of the South African place is a social construct (just as place itself is a social construct) and saying that it is a social construct does not provide us with any meaningfully better understanding of how the mystery affects our lives. Instead, we need to consider questions that allow for the contingent but significant features of this mystery in our place to play philosophically important roles. Thus, we ought to favour phenomenological and hermeneutic questions about the fragmentation of place; that is, we should start with two broad questions:

1) What is it like to live in this fragmented place? (Phenomenological Questions)

And

2) What does it mean to live in this fragmented place? (Hermeneutic Questions)

These two questions can be further broken up into smaller, 'sub-questions'. As an example the phenomenological questions, one might focus on the racialisation of place when considering how place is fragmented in South Africa ('What is it like to live in a racialised place?'). We might also ask what constitutes the concept of self in this fragmented place, where this question is to be seen as an extension of, 'What is it like to *live/be* in this fragmented place?' Phenomenological questions about the South African place bring up ethical questions. For example, if I am to consider what it is like to live as a racialised being, fixed as it were by the gaze of another, then I must also consider how I am to treat this other, how the other *ought* to treat me and whether this racialisation is desirable, or ethical. I take it

that these questions will require in depth investigation that is beyond the scope of a prolegomenon.

For this discussion on the fragmentation of place, I am going focus on hermeneutic questions. From a hermeneutic perspective, philosophers must determine whether (and to what extent) we can talk about the South African place. Questions around the South Africa place as a meaningful unit fall under what Janz calls ‘questions of aggregation’ (2009). It is clear that South Africa’s *topemes* – its smaller units of place – play a prominent role in how this place is conceived of. One way to understand the fragmentation of place in South Africa is that these *topemes* have been so exclusively homogenous that we have failed to create an overarching sense of what matters in South Africa. Without this overarching sense of what matters, it seems that the South African place may simply be an aggregation of smaller places, rather than a holistically meaningful unit. The fragmentation of place manifests itself in a complete disagreement of what matters in the South African place because people occupying the various smaller *topemes* view shared place vastly differently. Consider for example, how one might identify what matters in Grahamstown. For a student, staff member or middle class white resident, Rhodes University is an integral part of the town, while the townships to the East are troublesome areas which Grahamstown has to handle in some way. However, for a black resident in the Joza township, the township is an integral part of the place (and not a problem to be solved) and the formerly white institution of Rhodes represents a rich/white incursion into the traditionally Xhosa lands of the Eastern Cape. Both groups orientate themselves towards different and exclusive interpretations of what matters in Grahamstown. When we talk about the place of Grahamstown, we could be talking about either of these two constructions of place, but it does not seem that we could be talking about *both* constructions simultaneously as they are exclusive of one another. The hermeneutic aspect of the fragmentation of place thus problematises what we refer to when we talk about a South African place.

One may overcome this problem by constructing a comprehensive picture of the South African place, which accounts for all narratives of what matters in this place. By including every *topeme*’s construction of what matters in this place, we may get an overview of this whole (but fragmented) place. For example, Grahamstown may just be that place about which there are competing valuations. However, such an approach can only be a temporary solution to the problem. By providing a comprehensive picture of the different accounts of a place, we do not point out what matters in this place; we are only able to map out the areas of contestation between the different *topemes*. What is needed in the long term

is a sense of the shared values which underscore this place. Mangcu refers to the shared values which underscore and unify a place as a ‘civic religion’ (2001).

Composite places that are not fragmented are constructed around a shared set of values or a general recognition of what matters in this place – they have a civic religion. Having shared values does not prevent smaller *topemes* from recognising different values or interpretations of what matters, but it does mean that these *topemes* agree on a baseline set of values. For example, multiple political and ethnic groups may occupy London and each of these groups recognises its own religious, cultural and ethical values. However, in order for these groups to coexist peacefully – and in order for us to talk about a shared place – they agree to mutually respect each other’s dignity and to mutually tolerate the other’s recognised values as far as is possible.⁸⁰ The basis of their agreement forms a social contract which posits a set of mutually shared values. In other words, the different groups of London recognise that certain secular values matter and a composite place of London can be posited from these shared secular values. One approach to South Africa’s place is to consciously institute a shared set of public values; that is, to consciously *create* a civic religion.

One might argue that we do have civic religion, as expressed in our Constitution. However, upon closer inspection, the 1996 Constitution does not embody an actually shared set of values. Z. Pallo Jordan points out that the Constitution arose out of a debate between the various stakeholders in the Congress for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) talks (2012: 31). The stakeholders were by and large suspicious of liberalism, but opted for a constitution which enshrined liberal values as the best method for protecting the insular groups’ interests (Jordan, 2012: 31). The Constitution enshrines values that we *ought* to hold, if we desire to share our place with others. Yet, it cannot act as a description of the values that we do hold precisely because it is not clear that all people groups in South Africa wish to cohabit in mixed, composite places. In short, South Africa’s constitutional liberalism exists *despite* the fact that liberalism is not the dominant ideology in South Africa. The dissonance between the normative standard of common values expressed in the Constitution and the actual contradictory sets of values expressed in South Africa becomes apparent when one considers that there is still a significant tendency within South Africa to homogenise places.⁸¹

⁸⁰ This is, in short, liberalism as is advocated by Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (1972). The classical limitation on the extent to which groups’ values and practices are respected is that they be allowed to the extent that they do not unnecessarily limit another group’s values and practices.

⁸¹ The homogenisation of place requires the violent suppression or expulsion of voices that do not assume the recognised values of a group. There are striking examples of this in South Africa. The phenomenon of corrective rape in South Africa has made international news. (Corrective rape is the rape of lesbians or transgendered people with the expressed aim of ‘correcting’ their sexuality.) Arguably, it is part of a *nativist* project to

Arguably, the Constitution has failed to create a civic religion in South Africa because it embodies a response to another type of composite place, not a fragmented place. Therefore, the liberal values of the Constitution do not provide us with the shared values necessary for us to be able to talk about a holistically meaningful South African place.

Failing liberalism, is there another sense of what matters which can be pointed to as a distinguishing marker of the South African place? At this point, we must leave the descriptive hermeneutic project and consider a prescriptive politico-ethical project. As far as the descriptive project is concerned, there is plenty of space for further investigation, but the point has been made: what we mean by 'South Africa' at present can only refer to a fragmented place. There is, however, also a prescriptive project: South Africans need to find another way of *creating* a civic religion. This civic religion must contain within it an imperative to be inclusive. If the different groups in South Africa recognise this imperative, then we have the basis to start talking meaningfully about a common South African place.

Mangcu suggest that ubuntu may play this role (2001: 22). In the next Chapter of this thesis, I will consider how this may be. In the meantime, it is necessary for this prolegomenon that I consider another problematic mystery in South Africa. While the fragmentation of place is a generally felt mystery, it is one which academics show more promise in being able to solve: ethics, phenomenology, hermeneutics and political sciences are the domain of philosophers. However, philosophers' ability to deal with this general mystery could be undermined if they are unable to describe the place properly. I consider this second mystery here because I, like any academic working on the South African place, need to admit the unavoidable problems of being an academic trained in a Western institution trying to understand the South African place. Any current South African philosophers working on the South African place will be affected by the following mystery.

2nd Mystery: How Do We As Academics Approach The South African Mysteries?

In 2007, Metz published a ground-breaking paper, 'Toward an African Moral Theory'. He uses a process of reflective equilibrium between a set of six normative intuitions that Africans and Westerners have in common, and six apparently distinctively African normative

recreate a mythical pure and traditional Africa as it seeks to forcibly maintain what are perceived as traditional sexualities. Similarly, Afrikaner nationalist groups have managed to entrench themselves in white-only, cultural communities, such as Kleinfontein outside of Pretoria and Orania in the Free State. Arguably, these incidents point towards a continuation of the Apartheid tendency to homogenise place, which is expressed to different degrees throughout South Africa.

intuitions to arrive at a deontological principle which is meant to summarise ubuntu. The deontological principle is:

‘An action is right just insofar as it produces harmony and reduces discord; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to develop community.’ (Metz, 2007: 334)

If Metz is right, then he succinctly captures what ubuntu is and all that needs to be done is to analyse what this principle entails in various situations.⁸² Ramose responds to this formulation in a tellingly titled paper, ‘But Hans Kelsen was not born in Africa: a reply to Thaddeus Metz’ (2007). Ramose contends that Metz’s principle fails to capture what ubuntu is precisely because the method he used to arrive at it and indeed its very formulation is *allochthonous*, or ‘not from Africa’. Now, it may be easy to brush what Ramose says aside: South Africa is, after all, a composite place, and Western thought has permeated the place, or at least occupies a significant position in this place. Yet we should be sensitive to what Ramose has to say if we are to take doing philosophy-in-place seriously, even if we do not accept his complete dismissal of Metz’s project.

Janz asks us to engage with place in a process that he calls ‘Listening and Speaking’ (2009). Listening and speaking requires that we favour the theoretical frameworks developed within a place to engage with a place. We may, after some time investigating the theoretical frameworks of a place, find that they need to be adjusted in order to better bring out what matters in a place. But we ought not to favour using theoretical frameworks developed in other places for highlighting what matters in a particular place. In his 2012 paper, Janz develops the idea that importing concepts (and, it follows, theoretical frameworks) from other places will always result in a fundamental misunderstanding; this misunderstanding may prove to be useful, interesting and even highlight previously unthought-of aspects, but it remains a misunderstanding. As a misunderstanding it fails to represent what matters in this place. Consider another example of a misunderstanding: You would like to understand ‘brotherly love’ in the Christian tradition of philosophy. You may choose between reading St Augustine, C.S. Lewis and Kierkegaard on one hand, or Marxian or psychoanalytical texts on the other. No doubt, the latter provide a worthwhile understanding of the concept, but they remain misunderstandings: they are *re-readings* of Christian thought. We ought to prefer Christian writers in this case as their theoretical frameworks are designed to highlight what matters *in the Christian place*. Marxian or psychoanalytical texts highlight other salient features of brotherly love that arguably only become salient in another place –for example, the

⁸² Of course, Metz is careful to spell out what is meant by ‘harmony’ so that it better captures what he takes to be African normative intuitions, including positive commitments towards others in the community.

place of the oppressed proletariat revolting against the religious authorities in Europe in 1848. If one were to 'listen and speak' with the Christian place, one ought to favour the writings of Kierkegaard over those of Marx – although we may find that what Marx has to say about Christianity is more relevant to *our* place.

How, then, should we understand Ramose's criticism of Metz's project? Metz certainly wants to develop a distinctively African concept, so he is not acting in bad faith. Instead, Metz is a clear example of someone who is trapped by a hermeneutic bias. For Metz, a moral theory ought to be presented in terms of a deontological principle which neatly explains the moral nature of any given action. This is a bias to which he would appeal when analysing a concept as a potential moral theory – and in attempting to analyse a concept as a potential moral theory, he is forced to reread it in the terms of a deontological principle. Ramose refers to such a principle as a '*Grundnorm*', and maintains that such a formulation is so foreign to African cultures that it cannot successfully convey what ubuntu is (2007). Following Janz's preference for listening and speaking (2009), I agree with Ramose, but maintain that Metz's misunderstanding remains interesting and worthwhile reading for a student of ubuntu – though as a secondary text. By stating ubuntu in terms of a *Grundnorm*, we necessarily force ubuntu to communicate with another place and ignore the potential of *this* place for explaining ubuntu. By advocating that we see Metz (2007) as providing us with a rereading of ubuntu, I advocate pluralism when considering the validity of theoretical frameworks. In principle, several mutually exclusive frameworks can correctly convey what is meaningful about a phenomenon, just as different people may provide several mutually exclusive, but accurate descriptions of a painting. However, if we want a fundamental understanding of a concept, we must favour a theoretical framework developed in that place. Thus, we ought to prefer South African theoretical frameworks of analysing ubuntu (and, by extension, the South African place).

But herein lies a problem. The South African place is not analogous to the Christian place discussed above: with the Christian place, we have a rich tradition of writers who are well acquainted with the place; in South Africa we do not have such a tradition. African philosophy is unwritten until the second half of the 20th century (see Hallen, 2009). Older forms of orally transmitted African philosophy suffered heavy losses with the disruption of African traditions and family life brought about by colonisation and Apartheid.⁸³ The

⁸³ One of the major mechanisms of 20th century white economic domination was a system which necessitated migrant labour (see Terreblanche, 2002). By doing so, this system effectively and, arguably permanently, destroyed African family structures.

disruption of oral traditions and the lack of written traditions mean that we can only speculate as to traditional African critical methods in what has since become South Africa. Furthermore, academic writing since colonisation has pointedly mimicked European and American methods of analysis, and thus has remained an extension of the European place in Africa, rather than becoming part of the South African place. It has failed to become part of the composite place of South Africa because it has unconsciously adhered to the universalist conceptions of thought outlined above, and not designed its methods to bring out what matters in the South African place. So, unlike when dealing with Christian concepts, we do not have a standing tradition of philosophy-in-place from which to assume critical methods. Nor should we prefer traditional African methods for understanding current South Africa or current South African philosophical concepts. This place is composite and, while the various places in South Africa are difficult to access, they influence and shape each other. If Western methods fundamentally misunderstand our place and the concepts therein, purely African methods are bound to do the same. Ideally, we ought to prefer methods whose provenance is composite in the same way that our place is composite. To date, no such methods exist.

That we have only a limited corpus of thought written from within the South African place has important ramifications for a project such as this one. In writing about the South African place, identifying certain features as mysteries and taking mysteries to be the salient features to which philosophy responds, I have my own hermeneutic methodological biases. My biases are (mostly unconsciously) informed by my academic training which is predominantly Western, and the literature to which I have exposed myself, especially Janz who writes from Western place. Even when I have included writings from African places, they run the risk of being nothing more than interesting, useful misunderstanding. My own work is, it follows, like all current South African philosophy: at best, an interesting and useful misunderstanding of our place. But, as all current South African philosophy cannot be more than an interesting, useful misunderstanding of our place, we have nothing to prefer over it.

Fortunately, we need not relegate all South African philosophy to being a misunderstanding. Janz argues that concepts and writings about a place become part of a place (2012). As we write and investigate the South African place, gradually our methods and concepts will become part of the South African place. Of course, if we continue to practice philosophy in such a way that it is not sensitive to the features of this place, we risk perpetuating the fragmentation of the South African place. However, if we focus on the South African place and consciously tailor our methods to represent what matters in this place, we

will develop methods of analysis that become increasingly able to represent this place. In this way, we build a philosophical tradition which is both distinctive and successful.

In the meantime, South African writers need to be aware of the constant risk that they misunderstand place. When we apply a Sartrean analysis of racism in South Africa, for instance, it must be with the understanding that the analysis must still be adapted to our place and that our first attempts will essentially be a *re-reading* of place – one which highlights new and different aspects of race in South Africa, but one which will not entirely capture what matters about race in South Africa. Only by continually reshaping our biases and by reshaping the South African place by writing about it will we develop methods that could represent what matters in the South African place with regards to race. Despite being bound to misunderstand our place, it is only by representing our place that we are able to come to know it.

Writing about Mysteries and Where to from Here

The two mysteries outlined in this chapter are by no means exhaustive. Part of the reason for this is simply the space constraint that I have in writing this thesis. But there is a more purposeful reason for not giving a comprehensive list of the mysteries in the South African place. The mystery of the fragmentation of our place is central to all other place-specific mysteries in South Africa. By exploring this mystery itself, we will be forced to explore the other mysteries of this place. Now, we may disagree about what these mysteries are, and this will lead to a more in-depth discussion of the South African place. But this discussion needs to happen outside of this thesis. So, instead of giving a comprehensive list of the other mysteries, I propose that they be discovered by focussing on the fragmentation of the South African place.

Having related the other mysteries to the fragmentation of place, we should not assume that a solution to one is a solution to all. Indeed, each of these mysteries will require its own rigorous investigation and debate, using both methods developed for this place (primarily) and methods developed for other places. We may discover that ubuntu works well as a civic religion, but by itself is insufficient to deal with the phenomenology of race and racialisation. If, on the other hand, ubuntu does provide us with the conceptual tools for dealing with race and racialisation, it must be shown. Fortunately, this gives us space to develop an interesting body of literature concerning philosophy in a South African place.

Chapter 4

Reconceptualisation of Ubuntu

In this thesis, I have argued that philosophy in South Africa has been practiced poorly. As a concept, ubuntu is the clearest example of the failures of South African philosophy. These failures come about because philosophical projects are subsumed by a more pervasive, political project: to show Africa (more specifically, South Africa) to be a locus of intellectual worth. Instead of dismissing this political project, I propose that we work within its constraints to recreate an interesting, distinctive tradition of philosophy. In order to do this, we need to be able to show that concepts themselves, and by extension philosophy, have a place. The claim that ubuntu is either essentially African or an untranslatable African concept fails to show ubuntu to be of philosophical worth. For this reason, I suggest that we consider Janz's re-conceptualisation of philosophy: that all philosophy is contingent on place. When we situate philosophy as contingent on a particular place, we are able to adjust the criteria for successful philosophy. By showing that the criteria for a successful philosophical project are connected to a place, we are able to fulfil the political demands placed on ubuntu without compromising its philosophical integrity.

Let us briefly recount the criteria I gave for us to consider a concept to be successful in Chapter 1:

1. Distinctiveness;
2. Consistent usage;
3. Rigour, or a concern for accuracy;
4. Interestingness; and
5. Sustainability, or the existence of a prolonged debate.

A successful philosophical concept should satisfy all of these criteria, though successful concepts can, over time, become unsuccessful as the debate around them wanes, or shifts

towards something else. If we accept Janz's model of philosophy, we are able to add more substance to these criteria. A concept is granted distinctiveness, in part, because it responds to a distinctive place. Because it responds to a distinctive place, a concept must be so designed as to bring out what matters in its particular place. Thus, it would be engineered distinctively from any similar concepts in other places. Place also provides motivation for consistent usage and rigour. This is because a concept responds to a particular mystery which has persistent features. The persistence of these features guarantee that the concept be used with a base-level of consistency. That a mystery presents us with an existential challenge provides us with immediate motivation to find a rigorous and practical understanding of it: anything less would not diminish its existential challenge. A concept is interesting because it relates to our place in a particular way: it promises to give us tools for dealing with one or more of the mysteries in this place. But we must be careful; by 'promise' I do not mean that the concept *actually* gives us the tools for dealing with our mysteries. Rather, promise is a more like a hunch; it is an intuitive (but often wrong) reflex identification of potentially useful features. A concept remains interesting so long as we find that we can use it to deal with our mysteries, and loses its interestingness when we discover that it cannot help us.⁸⁴ Finally, the persistence of mysteries and the fact that place changes slowly guarantees us of sustained debates when we conduct philosophy-in-place. Of course, places change over time. As places change, concepts applicable to a place during one period can become inapplicable to the same place in a different period. When a concept becomes inapplicable, it may be adapted to the new place depending on the nature of the concept itself and the context of the concept, or it may fail to adapt. If it fails to adapt, we may relegate it to historical studies, or we may continue to use it as something of a vestigial feature of our philosophical tradition. A philosophical concept that is successful of a long period time should have adapted to different places throughout different times.

By situating philosophy in place, we are able to add a sixth criterion for successful philosophy:

6. A philosophical tradition is good if it provides us with an accurate fundamental understanding of our place.

⁸⁴ At this point, it may be necessary to recall that Marcel held that philosophy is an ongoing process, as opposed to a finished result. Once a mystery is dealt with and no longer presents us with a threat, we no longer conduct philosophy when considering it. Instead, it falls into the realm of history and the study of past ideas. So a successful concept can become uninteresting when the mystery it deals with no longer presents us with an existential challenge.

By giving a fundamental understanding of our place, I mean that the concepts and logic used by a tradition must be able to give us models which

- a. Allow us to explain current and past phenomena in this place in terms of abstract principles; and/or
- b. Are able to act as predictive models for future phenomena; and/or
- c. Are able to give us normative standards for interacting with our place.

By accuracy,⁸⁵ I mean to add an open-ended truth clause. It is necessary that a philosophical tradition have a truth (or reality tracking) clause if it is to give us any understanding of our place. However, just what it means to be truthful or reality-tracking is something that a philosophical project by its very nature defines as it engages with its place. I assume, nevertheless, that whether a project is truthful/reality-tracking will be revealed through continual application and investigation of the project itself. This criterion is meant to weed out harmful, exclusionist philosophical traditions, such as a philosophical basis for racism. We need to avoid having to credit harmful traditions with philosophical success, because by their harm and exclusivity they have shown themselves not to be able to account for at least one set of phenomena: namely, the human condition of the excluded Other. A good philosophical tradition needs to be able to account for as many phenomena as possible, as accurate to what matters to each viewpoint as possible.⁸⁶

Having recounted what would make a philosophical concept or tradition successful, it will not be my aim to show that ubuntu will be successful. Criterion (5) is not something that we can know about a concept beforehand. Rather, what I aim to show here is that ubuntu *could be* a successful philosophical concept. I do this by first locating the South African mystery to which ubuntu is best suited as a response and then showing that its possible response to this mystery is distinctive and interesting. It follows also that, should ubuntu fail to be successful, we have the criteria in this thesis to develop another successful, distinctly South African philosophical tradition of thought. Naturally, we are talking about ubuntu as a concept *adapted* to this place. We therefore need to engage in some cherry-picking, but as I

⁸⁵ It is important to differentiate between (3) a *concern* for accuracy and (6) accuracy itself. (3) tells us about the mental states of the philosophers engaged in the project; (6) tells us about the project itself. In principle, we are able to know (3) at the time of investigation; (6), however, becomes apparent with the passage of time, or with application.

⁸⁶ This constraint does not amount to saying that every viewpoint is equally valid. Rather, it is obvious that some viewpoints are misguided or intentionally ignorant of features of their place. A good philosophical tradition should, however, be able to explain how this disconnect arises while being able to identify what matters for these viewpoints.

have argued *not adapting* ubuntu to this place would relegate it to the history of ideas, and would not be a proper, critical philosophical engagement with our place.

The Mystery and What This Place Needs

The central mystery of the South African place is that it is fragmented. (I assume that ubuntu is not immediately useful in dealing with the second mystery mentioned in the previous chapter). In the previous chapter, I mention that Mangcu suggests that ubuntu is a response to the lack of a civic religion in South Africa. I take it that the lack of a civic religion is precisely what characterises the fragmentation of place. Mangcu holds that what is needed to deal with the fragmentation of place is a civic religion, that is, a set of generally shared (and officially endorsed) values that govern interactions between people with different conceptions of the good life. The question then that we need to ask is: Can ubuntu be modified to play the role of a civic religion in South Africa? By mapping out what a civic religion is and what particular constraints our mystery places on a civic religion, we will have outlined the basic shape that ubuntu needs to take to be successful.

The concept of a civic religion was first developed by Rousseau in *The Social Contract* (1762). Rousseau proposes a solution to a different place's mysteries: the place of Enlightenment Europe's clash of religions and the rise of an economically mobile middle class in formerly feudal states. His civic religion was more of a *religious* concept, requiring theistic beliefs and allowing the state to determine the articles of faith to be shared by everyone. Despite these very place-specific features, we are able to import certain features of his concept to our place. Importing his concept is possible because of certain similarities between our places: both are in a time of transition, and both lack a unifying ethos. However, we need to be careful how we adapt Rousseau's concept to our place. So we must be selective in our rereading of Rousseau. Let us then define what a civil religion so that it best suits our place.

A civic religion is the implicit basis of a social contract between people with different conceptions of the good life. In determining what actions are permissible and what principles are to govern interactions between people, contractors must make use of a set of shared values with a common conception of how these values relate to each other. Common candidates for these values include dignity, freedom and equality because respecting them tends to make conversation between the different parties possible. Contractors may decide that some values are to be prioritized over others, and even that certain values are non-negotiable and cannot be compromised. Or they may not. What determines the best set of

values and their arrangement in a civic religion is nothing more than the combination that best allows for a conversation in a particular place. The emphasis on hermeneutics and practicality as the justifying features of a civic religion usually de-prioritises any metaphysical considerations.⁸⁷ Different parties may espouse different metaphysics, but a civic religion which relies too heavily on a particular set of metaphysical assumptions would have no or little coercive force over many of the contractors. Rousseau was especially careful, despite his emphasis on a theistic metaphysics, to leave his metaphysical basis as vague as possible. I will therefore assume that a civic religion with overly particular metaphysical convictions is going to be too exclusive to be successful in providing cohesion in South Africa. This assumption rules out using any particular religious commitments to the existence of a God, gods or ancestors, as each of these entities is doubted by at least some groups in South Africa. Instead, successful candidates for a civic religion ought to focus more on ethical and practical values.

In summary, a civic religion is defined for our purposes as a set of agreed upon social values which facilitate mutually beneficial interaction (and mediate conflict) between people with different conceptions of the good life. Crucially, the values of a civic religion fundamentally determine which actions are permissible and which are impermissible within a society, thus setting the minimum standard for taking part in a society. It may be thought that a civic religion as it has been defined is still insufficient to counter the fragmentation of place in South Africa. After all, South Africans may need motivation to adopt the ethical values of a civic religion if the value of living in a mixed place is questionable. Mangcu suggests that a civic religion should also foster a foundational shared identity among the different groups in the contract (2001). In the case of Rousseau's civic religion, such an identity could be formulated around religious belief itself. Though the South African place does not lend itself to a religious base identity, there may be a broader sense of identity that can be appealed to. By emphasising a shared identity, we are able to provide an incentive against othering members of the contract. (Othering is undesirable as it acts as a basis for exclusionary actions and policies, such as apartheid itself).⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Notably, Rousseau required theism as a feature of his civic religion (1762). Bertram points out that Rousseau did not believe that atheists could be trusted to respect the values of a social contract (2012). False as this may be, it is likely that people at Rousseau's time would not have generally found his point disagreeable given the pervasiveness of religious sentiment at the time.

⁸⁸ I take it that what Mangcu (2001) and I refer to as a civic religion has a much narrower sense than is commonly referred to by sociologists and political scientists. My use of the term refers to the tailored version above, not necessarily including state-perpetuated dogmas and rituals.

It must be stressed that a civic religion is not a philosophy. If we develop ubuntu as a civic religion, then we will develop it as a set of practical values, or perhaps a lived 'philosophy'. At the level of civic religion, ubuntu does not represent the level of critical thought generally practiced in academic philosophy. However, it provides a foundational set of intuitions and norms that can be refined into critical ethical and moral thought. I shall discuss how these institutions and norms develop into a philosophy later. At this point, however, it is sufficient to point out that ubuntu does provide just such norms and intuitions, but as I will argue below, these norms and intuitions apply to the wrong place. We need to consciously reconstruct ubuntu *according to this place*. In doing this, we will be able to provide a new set of norms and intuitions to refine into a philosophy.

It could be argued that we already have a civic religion in the form of liberalism. If so, and it is successful, then it makes little sense to propose ubuntu as a civic religion. However, the fragmentation of place persists, despite nearly twenty years of liberal democracy. We must admit that liberalism has failed to become the right civic religion for our place. By looking at how it has failed, we may be able to engineer our use of ubuntu to formulate a better response to the mystery.

The Official Response: Liberalism

Jordan tells us that the parties in the CODESA talks settled on liberalism as the best means of protecting the interests of the vastly different (but conservative) parties involved in the talks (2012: 31). These parties therefore settled on liberalism not because they recognized the values assumed in it as fundamental, but simply because it allowed them to have a conversation. The South African Constitution became one of the best articulated liberal documents in recent history, accepted by political parties (and a people) largely distrustful of liberalism. Following the pattern that Rawls set, the Constitution aims to allow different people with different conceptions of the good to coexist peacefully in the same place. Rawls ordered his two principles such that freedom from coercion is prioritised over equality, or social cohesion for that matter (1972). The South African Constitution reflects this prioritisation: for example, land reform is encouraged, but is only allowed to happen with the consent of the current owner of the land. Thus, the property rights of citizens are prioritised over the value of equality.

Mangcu characterises the liberal approach of the Constitution as one which promotes tolerance (2001: 20). Tolerance is the virtue of finding a practical balance between liberalism's two central values: liberty and equality. In a liberal society, tolerance amounts to

minimal interference with the rights and the conception of the good of any particular group, and is the guiding principle for inter-group interactions. Tolerance is a desirable feature of a civic religion: it protects the contractors from being needlessly disadvantaged by the social contract. Without tolerance, we are faced with an exclusionary civic religion which promotes the exclusion of particular groups. So tolerance is a desirable feature for South Africa's civic religion.

However, tolerance by itself is insufficient to respond to a fragmented place. At best, it can promote an uneasy truce between the parties. There are two reasons for tolerance being insufficient to deal with the fragmentation of place in South Africa: 1) liberal values are poorly received by most South Africans, and 2) tolerance is unable to present an inclusive civic religion as desirable.

Firstly, tolerance has become intrinsically linked with South African law in the minds of the people. At best, the law can prevent the expression of certain intolerant attitudes. South Africa has an excellent legal system for enforcing tolerance insofar as expressions of intolerance are punished. However, in a country with a long history of civil disobedience, the coercion of the law hardly stands as a marker of moral rightness in the eyes of the people. Similarly, although the political powers of the country eventually settled on liberalism and tolerance as means of ending the stalemate during the CODESA talks, this has been insufficient to convince most South Africans to adopt tolerant liberalism as a nationally expressed civic religion. The disconnect between the 'official' values and virtues of the state, and the perceived values and virtues of majority people in South Africa can be seen in the high crime rate of South Africa. Steven Pinker argues that countries with a low acceptance of the moral, legal or political order display a high crime rate (2011: 84). South Africa is known for especially intolerant crimes such as 'corrective' rape against gender nonconforming individuals, and xenophobia. In a country with high levels of distrust of legal and political powers, the virtue of tolerance is seen as being imposed from without, and not as the moral foundation of society.

Secondly and more fundamentally, tolerance cannot make continuing in a social contract desirable itself. Rather, it assumes that the contract is already desirable. In South Africa, as I discussed in the previous chapter, it is not clear whether or not the social contract between the various groups in our country is desirable, primarily because it is associated with an unjust provenance. By toting tolerance alone as a public virtue, legislative and political powers will not be able to show the current mixture of people in South Africa to be desirable. As a result, tolerance can do nothing to overcome the fragmentation of place. If we are left

with only tolerance as the guiding virtue of interactions in South Africa, we risk having a short-lived social contract between the various groups. Furthermore, if people begin to question the liberal foundations of our country's legal system, tolerance may even become an undesirable virtue, associated with keeping in place an undesirable social structure. A successful civic religion in South Africa would have to show a contract between the current groups of people in South Africa to be desirable *in spite of* its unjust history. For this reason, it is necessary to adopt either further values or virtues of negotiating values as part of our civic religion. It is this need that gives us the space to consider ubuntu as a practical philosophical concept. Ubuntu, it appears, may be able to act as both an additional set of values value and another virtue for negotiating competing values.

Which Ubuntu?

Although Mangcu does not explore the issue in detail, his article (2001) suggests that ubuntu could provide us with other values and virtues of negotiating these values. If so, then we have in principle a concept which can help us build a civic religion, and from which we can refine a philosophical tradition. Nevertheless, we must be clear about how we ought to approach the concept. As stated in the Preliminary Remarks of this thesis, ubuntu is a contested concept: there are many differing conceptions of ubuntu currently in the literature. There are therefore some conceptions of ubuntu that will not work as a civic religion because they are overcommitted to beliefs and values which are not commonly held.

For writers such as Ramose (2002) and Keevey (2009), ubuntu inevitably has metaphysical commitments, specifically tied to traditional African religious and social systems. Furthermore, Keevey points to the social structure of communities, which explicitly espouse ubuntu, as undesirable due to their being patriarchal (2009). If ubuntu has such implicit particular metaphysical and outdated moral commitments, it does not seem that it could be a civic religion for a multicultural place such as South Africa.⁸⁹ The only way an ubuntu with these sorts of commitments could become a civic religion is if one were to exclude all dissenting peoples from the South African place: a project which bears significant similarities with the apartheid project.

But can we really ever re-apply the ubuntu of pre-European incursion to present-day South Africa? According to Janz's (2012) philosophy of place, it is impossible to replicate the concept. The South African place is irrevocably altered; the passage of time alone means

⁸⁹ Arguably, an ubuntu with these sorts of commitments belongs rather in the category of the history of ideas – a fascinating engagement with a historical place, but hardly suitable to present-day South Africa.

that we are dealing with a different place to pre-incursion Africa. Present-day South Africa has many more (and much more diverse) people groups coexisting against a history of violence and oppression. For any possible conception of ubuntu, we would necessarily be *re-reading* the concept *in a different place* if we were to apply it today. By re-reading the concept, we highlight different features of it and suppress other features, such that it becomes different. This is because concept and place exist in a dialectic, each influencing how the other is being understood. It is therefore impossible to replicate the concept as it existed in previous places: we must ‘tailor’ the concept to this place. Even purists who aim to import an authentic, ‘as-it-was’ conception of ubuntu are forced to reread the concept according to the constraints and contingencies of this, present place. The only real decision then is how conscious we will be of our tailoring the concept. It stands to reason that being conscious of how we reread a concept is better as we can have more control over how the concept develops.

I am not arguing for radical constructivism, or that we can do whatever we like with a concept. Like places, concepts have continuity: if we alter them too much, too quickly, they become unrecognisable and lose their meaning. Rather, we need to balance the changes required by rereading a concept in a different place with the need for continuity. This balance is best achieved by being both explicitly selective in our rereading of ubuntu and sensitive to what is taken to be central to a concept. Due to the constraint of continuity, it is not clear whether or not we will be able to rid ubuntu of its metaphysical basis. Almost all writers on ubuntu today admit that what makes ubuntu distinctive is its commitment to certain statements about being human (or human ontology). For example, the statement, ‘*Umntu ngumntu ngabantu*’ (‘A person is/becomes a person through [other] people’) has become one of the most common formulations of ubuntu. The statement has some obvious ontological commitments, namely that a necessary feature of being human is that the being is situated in a network of relationships with other human beings. Furthermore, the statement also appears to imply a connection between metaphysical states and normative demands on people. To reject either of these commitments as integral to ubuntu would be to stretch the concept too far and would result in meaning-destructive discontinuity between the older concept and the rereading. It becomes apparent then, that ubuntu will have to retain *some* metaphysical commitments despite civic religions generally not having metaphysical commitments.

Do ubuntu’s metaphysical commitments mean that it is unsuitable as a civic religion? Not necessarily so. Remember that the reason civic religions avoid overly particular metaphysical commitments is that they tend to exclude too many of the contractors’

conceptions of the good. If, however, ubuntu's metaphysical convictions are general enough not to exclude too many other metaphysical convictions, they do not prevent it from being a civic religion. Rather, they relate the practical ethical values of a civic religion to some very basic assumptions about being human. Part of the future philosophy written on ubuntu then must show that ubuntu's metaphysical convictions are general and compatible with multiple particular metaphysical convictions. As a rereading, future philosophy on ubuntu should be selective against the particular, rich metaphysical convictions of a traditionalist conception of ubuntu. Nevertheless, it should be careful to preserve continuity of the general metaphysical convictions of ubuntu.

Notice that the imprecise nature of these metaphysical commitments is grounds for further, fruitful philosophical engagement, rather than the rejection of the concept. What we want in ubuntu at this level is not a fully cashed out conception, but rather one that prompts future investigation by promising to provide a solution to our mystery(ies). For now it is enough to say that ubuntu has metaphysical commitments which relate the human moral being to the metaphysical nature of being human. Already, these bland commitments give us some extra values, and provide the basis for a shared identity. For example, ubuntu stresses the value of being human, especially as a socially situated and communally dependent being. By stressing the value of the being itself, and not its constituent features (e.g. liberty, autonomy and moral equality), ubuntu is able to place greater demands on us than simply that we be tolerant of each other. It is these extra demands that show ubuntu to be interesting.

Why Is Ubuntu Interesting?

Having discussed the mystery that ubuntu responds to (the fragmentation of place), the type of concept that ubuntu should be seen as (a concept tailored as a civic religion) and how we are to view ubuntu (careful rereading), what remains is to show how ubuntu could provide a novel and interesting response to our mystery. Liberalism fails because it only promotes tolerance as a virtue for dealing with composite places, and tolerance is not enough. What could ubuntu offer that liberalism does not?

Mangcu mentions what is lacking in the South African place: he calls it 'respect' (2001: 20). Mangcu suggests that respect amounts to taking an active interest in the other's projects, aims and goals. Mangcu's notes on respect are sparse, but give us something interesting to investigate. It is apparent that respect does not amount to an uncritical acceptance of the projects, aims and goals: if it were, it would not be respect of an intelligible, morally equal human being. Rather, proper respect for another human being is

the desire to understand and empathise with the agent that pursues these projects, and a predisposition to evaluate another favourably. Importantly, respect is attitudinal. Thus agents that respect others are motivated to act from their own beliefs about the other, rather than simple obedience to the law. The difference between tolerance and respect is neatly illustrated by two different attitudes towards different languages. A person who tolerates the different languages in her place will not interfere with them being spoken, but need not have an active interest in learning these languages. A person who respects the different languages in her place is eager to learn these languages to understand their speakers. She may, after having a conversation with her neighbours, decide that some are misguided in their descriptions of certain thing, but when she makes this judgement she does so from a position of understanding.

The language example highlights an important feature of respect. Respect is supererogatory. It cannot be mandated in any legal code (such as the Constitution) – the individual must willingly decide to adopt it as an attitude towards others. Instead, respect is manifested when the agent is willing to go beyond what is required of her. By respecting the different people involved in this fragmented place, South Africans start to work against the fragmentation of place in South Africa. Agents who respect each other will be interested in learning about each other's place(s). As they do so, what were mutually unintelligible places become progressively more understandable to each other. In this way, the foundational phenomenon leading to fragmentation (otherness) starts to fade.

The question is: can ubuntu offer us the virtue of respect? We have good reason to believe that ubuntu can. By stressing the value of being human as a social being, ubuntu provides incentive for taking the projects of another seriously. Tutu describes how ubuntu prizes empathy as the most moral emotion, and the lack thereof as the sign of moral depravity (1999: 32). Empathy may refer primarily to an emotional response to another, but it also requires that we take the other's projects into account. An empathetic person is one who would want to understand why a person feels the way she does. In order to do that, she needs to have the sort of respect outlined above. Ubuntu, then, absolutely requires respect.

To say that ubuntu requires respect is to make an interesting claim about supererogation. Put in another way, ubuntu requires that we act beyond what is required. This may seem strange, but consider a familiar example from traditional African thought that illustrates this: the relationship between host and guest. Ubuntu is often illustrated by

referring to the imperative to look after guests.⁹⁰ It can be characterised as ‘host’ ethic. Traditionally, a person with ubuntu would willingly take in a stranger as a guest for as long as she needs, providing food and shelter for her. The guest is not obliged to return any favours, nor would people say the host has ubuntu if he asks for something in return. However, if the guest is a ‘good guest’, or empathises with her host, she will do her bit to help with the household chores during her stay. In present-day terms, she may offer to help clean the dishes after the meals or make her bed in the morning. Doing such supererogatory acts willingly and without second thought shows the guest also to have ubuntu. The relationship between the host and the guest breaks down if one of them refuses to take part in supererogatory acts. Consider that a guest who offers nothing in return for her stay is hardly invited back.

One could translate the principle behind this local example to a much larger, more serious example from South Africa’s history: the non-violent change-over to black majority rule in 1994. Let us assume that Tutu was correct in connecting many black South Africans’ decision to relinquish their rights to retribution and radical redistribution with ubuntu: it was a supererogatory act carried out with the aim of fostering an empathetic, respectful connection with white South Africans.⁹¹ As it was a supererogatory act, it could not be followed by any move to oblige white South Africans to take steps towards their black counterparts. Hence, no mass reparations were required from white South Africans in general. Nevertheless, for ubuntu to have continued becoming the civic religion in South Africa, white South Africans needed to continue by taking part in further supererogatory acts. These acts should have taken into account the immensely unequal distribution of social and economic goods between white and black South Africans. By not reciprocating, white South Africans have shown themselves to be uninterested in taking part in a respectful community with black South Africans. In order for ubuntu to work as a civic religion, white South Africans need to engage in respectful, supererogatory exchanges with their black compatriots.

What we have in ubuntu then is a potential civic religion that shows promise as a philosophical concept. As a civic religion, ubuntu may be able to make living in a composite place desirable for South Africans. By stressing respect and the value of being human as a

⁹⁰ Cf., Nelson Mandela responding to questions by Tim Modise in *The Ubuntu Experience.ogg*, Canonical, Ltd. 24 May 2006. Retrieved from Wikipedia, URL =<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu_%28philosophy%29> on 20 August 2013, 22h40.

⁹¹ Although it is plausibly argued that South Africans opted for a peaceful transition in order to protect the economy, we do not see this pattern emerging in other recently liberated countries. Countries like Mozambique, Tanzania and Kenya forcibly expelled their white oppressors with little thought for the economic repercussions. One must assume that some non-economic consideration was at play in South Africa to allow for a peaceful transition.

social being, ubuntu is able to do what liberalism could not: show that it is desirable to live in a mixed-place South Africa, despite the morally tainted provenance of this mixture. Of course, how this is to happen must be spelled out in greater detail. It is particularly worrisome that ubuntu cannot be mandated by the state through courts of law. But there may be other ways of instilling ubuntu as a civic religion. Cashing out the possible ways in which ubuntu can be instilled as a civic religion, and what its values and virtues are is a project that should shape future South African philosophy. On a more abstract level, however, ubuntu shows promise as an analytical philosophical concept. Once we develop the values and virtues of ubuntu, we can start to analyse current phenomena in these terms. I have given a rough sketch of using ubuntu as an analytic tool above. By using ubuntu as an analytic tool, we are able to refine it as a South African philosophical concept which can be applied to multiple places, and potentially be universalised.

Coda: Where to From Here?

Ending a Prolegomenon

The aim of this thesis has been to provide a prolegomenon to South African philosophy. As such, it does not seem that I should finish it with a ‘conclusion’ as such, but rather with notes on where to go from here. The aim of this coda is to provide the reader with an overview of the questions and structure that should be taken away from this thesis.

I have focused on ubuntu as a clear example of a South African philosophical concept. However, the underlying intention of this paper has been to provide a model for developing *any* South African philosophical concept. To this extent, one needs to recognise that the model provided in the last chapter should serve mainly as a guideline, and should not dictate the development of any or every South African philosophical concept. The central, and only essential, feature of my proposed model is that the concept be developed by applying it to *this* place and its mysteries. We may find that ubuntu does not become a successful philosophy (though I have shown that it has the *potential* to do so), or that ubuntu ought not to become a civic religion, or that the best response to the fragmentation of place is not the creation of a civic religion. In each of these cases, however, we find that the political imperative explained in the first chapter remains the same: we must find a concept that undoes the de-intellectualisation of the South African place. My aim has been to suggest how we are to meet this imperative without sacrificing philosophical integrity.

Despite the doubt cast over the exact details of my sketch of ubuntu’s development as a philosophical concept, it is still worth our while to consider some further points about this sketch. If ubuntu is to become a civic religion, we need to consider several questions about how this should happen. I will consider two such questions in this coda. The first is how a generally held civic religion can become a philosophical concept in use of specialists, such as

philosophers. The second follows from the first question: how might we, and ought we, instate civic religion? The second question is concerned with the practical issues of this prolegomenon, but practical issues are no less important than the theory covered throughout the thesis. If we cannot practically implement the model outlined in this prolegomenon, we are no closer to solving the problem outlined in Chapter 1. As with the rest of this thesis, the coda can be nothing more than a sketch, which I hope will provide a framework for future philosophical discussion in South Africa.

First Consideration: How a Civic Religion Can Become a Philosophical Concept

In the previous chapter, I outlined how ubuntu might become a civic religion in South Africa. Of course, a civic religion is not the same thing as a philosophical concept. However, philosophy and civic religions are interrelated. In order to better explain how making ubuntu a civic religion would aid us in creating a philosophical concept, let us consider how the two areas of thought relate to each other.

The primary difference between a civic religion and a philosophical concept is the level of criticality with which each is held. Civic religions are values and beliefs widely held in an uncritical fashion; philosophical concepts on the other hand are used by a few academics and forever liable to be questioned. On the face of it, they are two vastly different fields of thought. While civic aspects of a civic religion may be analysed from time to time, they appear to be pervasive and to inform some of our most unconsciously held beliefs about right and wrong. Philosophy, on the other hand, is a highly conscious method of investigation. Ostensibly, values held in philosophy are those which can withstand critical scrutiny. Yet, upon closer investigation, it appears that philosophy in fact relies on a civic religion, or a fundamental set of assumed and shared beliefs and values. Even in the critical questioning that is characteristic of philosophy, we must assume other values, beliefs or concepts. We may, for instance, question Mills' utilitarianism, but we do so by appealing to a generally held conception of right and wrong, or even simply truth and falsity. Even when we further question these more basic concepts, we must appeal to some or other generally perceived value, perhaps authenticity for instance. So it seems that the critical engagement of philosophy must exist against a more mundane background of uncritically accepted values and beliefs. The converse, that philosophy does not start against a background of uncritically held beliefs and values, is a paralysing state of being in which nothing can be reasoned or

concluded. So, at best, philosophy can only get us to temporarily suspend certain beliefs or values while we find a better way to cash them out.

Of course, not all uncritically accepted values and beliefs constitute a civic religion. They only do so when they are generally held and are used to produce cohesion between the various groups in a society. Nevertheless, it follows that philosophy's relationship to a civic religion is the same as it would be to any set of uncritically accepted beliefs and values. Philosophy can both question the validity or usefulness of a specific civic religion and it can question the content of that civic religion, but it ultimately must assume *some* shared set of beliefs and values in order to operate, or have convincing conclusions. A civic religion, such as ubuntu, then can provide the base data and intuitions which we use both as the object of philosophy, and as the values and beliefs against which we test other objects.

The model above explains both how a philosophy and civic religion relate once they are well established, but it can also explain how a philosophy can be developed out of a civic religion. Once a civic religion is in place, it begins to inform the standards by which we analyse concepts and phenomena. As it does so, the values and beliefs entailed in it set the various thresholds after which we may take an argument and its conclusion to be convincing. For instance, if we assume ubuntu as a civic religion, we will fairly uncritically assume that humans are basically interconnected and interdependent beings, and that this metaphysical fact about us dictates certain ethical imperatives. With ubuntu as a civic religion, we may consider an argument for an ethical imperative *X* (for example, that animals have direct rights). The argument will be considered weak if it fails to appeal to certain values held by ubuntu as a civic religion – for example, it fails to show that animals form a morally relevant part of the network that constitutes human beings. Conversely, the argument will be considered more convincing if it appeals to humans' interconnected and interdependent nature. This is not to say that we cannot and ought not to be critical of the basic values and beliefs of ubuntu, but if ubuntu is to assume the place of a civic religion, the most convincing method of analysing ubuntu would be through its own critical apparatus, values and beliefs. For instance, if what Keevy (2009) maintains is true and patriarchy is an intrinsic feature of ubuntu, one may critically evaluate ubuntu-patriarchy through the other ethical imperatives generated by humans' interconnectedness. What we see here is the 'distillation' of a civic religion into a philosophical tradition. The more the civic religion's values and beliefs are used, and the more these values and beliefs themselves are evaluated in terms of the other features of the civic religion, the more rigorous a philosophical tradition we create.

By setting ubuntu up as a civic religion, we start a process that leads to ubuntu being ‘distilled’ into a philosophical method of analysis. Therefore, arguing for ubuntu as a civic religion amounts to arguing for putting in place the conditions for ubuntu to develop into a robust philosophical tradition. We must, then, consider how feasible it is to create an artificial, self-conscious civic religion out of ubuntu.

Creating a Civic Religion: The Practical and Ethical Feasibility of Instating Ubuntu

As I have already mentioned, civic religions *as political devices* are uncritically held, and normally are not the product of conscious intervention. Consider for example Catholicism in Medieval Europe. Although the church fathers were conscious of spreading their religion, those that assumed the religion were not generally conscious of adopting a civic religion *for the purposes of political cohesion*. Rather, the focus of most of the converted was on the validity of Catholic Christianity’s values and beliefs.⁹² Instead, civic religions usually arise organically, without the conscious aim of making them civic religions.

With this in mind, South Africa finds itself at a quandary. Nearly twenty years after the divisive political ideology of apartheid was removed from political power, we have as yet not managed to overcome the fragmentation of our place. Furthermore, it is uncertain that one will organically arise in the near future; we have as much chance of snapping back to another politically divisive ideology. So the question arises: is it possible to artificially instate a civic religion? On the face of it, the answer is, ‘Yes, but at what cost?’ Previous examples of artificial civic religions were often violently imposed, and were done so at the expense of critical thought. Consider the fascist ideologies of the early twentieth century. These ideologies themselves advocated horrendous civic values and beliefs, and they were successfully imposed through the rigorous application of propaganda in all spheres of life. Dissenters were often quelled through violent and morally objectionable means, and critical thought was stifled as it threatened the unifying projects of the fascist states. What makes the rise of these ideologies all the more horrifying, though, is that the states which imposed them were by and large successful in instating them as civic religions. As the most recent, blatant examples of artificial civic religions, they set the agenda for discussions on future civic religions. We have two lessons to learn from these twentieth century civic religions: 1) it is

⁹² Arguably, some figures were conscious of the political expediency of assuming a unified religion. A prime example of this can be found in Emperor Constantine, who was renowned for using theological unity to impose political unity. However, as Diarmaid McCulloch points out, most of the church fathers were concerned about the validity of the beliefs and values of the faith to the point where they preferred divisiveness over political unity (2009).

possible to successfully create an artificial civic religion, but 2) its creation has historically relied on morally objectionable means. One must ask: is it possible to achieve (1) without (2)?

This question will have to be explored in-depth by South African philosophers; it appears that some coercion is inevitable for instating a civic religion. It may be that necessity will push us to develop a way of satisfying (1) without going through (2). Consider what would happen if we fail to institute an artificial civic religion. Because civic religions are generally uncritically assumed, they often contain features which are not generally desirable: such as homophobia, patriarchy, racism or a set of religious practices which violently suppresses theological dissent. So, if a civic religion should arise organically in South Africa, it could well contain features that are unnecessarily destructive to certain features of our society. By consciously engineering a civic religion, we have a greater chance of avoiding unnecessary and/or violent exclusivity. A further worry is that South Africa will fail to generate a civic religion at all, and that the fragmentation of place will persist. In the previous chapter, I suggested that we currently have at best an uneasy truce between the different people groups in South Africa. Without a civic religion, there is little to stop South Africans from returning to the exclusivist thinking of apartheid. Developing a civic religion, then, becomes a necessary preventative measure, against both an objectionable organic civic religion and the morally dangerous persistence of the fragmentation of the South African place. The question, then, is: what level and type of coercion is best suited to instating our civic religion, and how do we avoid committing morally objectionable acts in instating this religion?

Although I cannot give a conclusive answer to this question, there are some avenues that are promising. Philosophers do not conduct all their work outside of the public sphere. Although most philosophical work today is published in academic papers that are read by only a few specialists; at various times in history, philosophers have taken up public positions leading debates around the states of their societies. Obviously, one can point to Socrates as the prime example of the public philosopher. Yet, there are more contemporary examples. Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus operated both as specialist philosophers and public leaders of philosophical debates during the mid-twentieth century. Both published various plays and novels to express their ideas, and Sartre published at least one philosophical book directed at a general audience: *La Question Juive* (1947) (translated as *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1951)). More recently and more locally, Samantha Vice managed to stir public debate with her paper, 'How Do I Live in this Strange Place?' (2010). Although she had her paper

published in an academic journal, the public commentator Eusebius McKaiser brought her work to public attention by analysing it in widely read South African newspapers. The resultant discussion was both polemical and sustained, showing that the South African public pays attention to what academics have to say about their place. Similarly, McKaiser has published his own book, *A Bantu in my Bathroom* (2012) which has also bridged the divide between philosophy and public commentary. So it seems South African philosophers can more directly influence the public debate on values in South Africa by publicising their own work. It may be that South African philosophers will have to access other media; although South Africans have an ostensibly high literacy rate, we are not by and large avid readers. Apart from using newspapers and online forums to stoke a debate, philosophers should make use of television and radio debates to turn attention to the fragmentation of the South African place and ubuntu's potential usefulness in overcoming it.

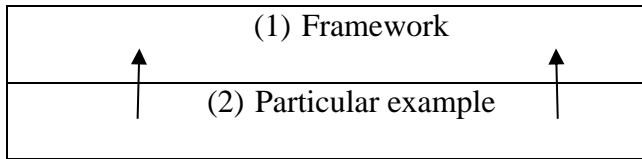
By taking part in public debates, and by bringing ubuntu-type values and criticism into the public sphere, philosophers are able to create a public intellectual atmosphere which assumes ubuntu as a civic religion. I do not assume that these avenues of instating a civic religion are without problems. For one thing, it is not certain that, by creating a debate around the fragmentation of place in South Africa and the use of ubuntu, South Africans would adopt ubuntu as a civic religion. They may settle on something else that may be created by the debate itself. Such a response would nevertheless be an intellectual, thoroughly debated response to our place. So we have here an avenue that is less morally objectionable than the propaganda regimes of the early twentieth century. I do assume however that a more rigorous public debate will have a positive outcome: it will motivate people to create a civic religion *from within*, as opposed to one being forced onto them. As long as philosophers and other intellectuals ensure that this debate is focused on the problems of the South African place, we have the potential to create a civic religion based on reflection on our place. Because this civic religion responds to place, we have in it the foundations for a philosophical tradition that focuses on this place, and that will thus overcome the problem outlined in the first chapter. Thus, the first question we must then ask in dealing with a fragmented place is how a civic religion might be instated.

Appendix

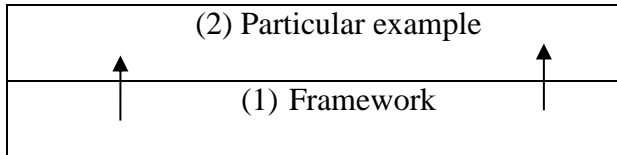
Figure 1: Understanding Place (Chapter 2)

Place			
1) Phenomenology – Subject		2) Hermeneutics	
Place and subject dialectically form each other		Place is a ‘meaningful space’ Places are narrative. How do places become meaningful?	
1.1) Milieu Embodied knowledge; individuated place, formed around the subject. Places are constructed around what matters. Places are created by repetitive actions and destroyed by disruptive actions. Our engagement with place shapes it.	1.2) Time ‘All subjectivity is time’ Place is dependent on time.	2.1.1) Borders How do we define a place? Places and identities are formed dialectically. Places can be formed in such a way as to exclude certain people, or interpretations.	2.2.1) Intensity Differences in interpretation of place create a debate which forms the meaning of place.
	1.2.1) Provenance The concepts and practices that make a place come from other places. Part of the meaning a place is derived from where these concepts come from.	2.1.2) Scale The scale of place which we consider is dependent on the conversation the subject is involved in.	
1.1.1) Alienation When places are disrupted, the subject becomes alienated – unable to identify what matters in her current place.	1.2.2) Topoi Places display recurrent themes, repeated actions and events over time.	2.1.3) Topemes Places consist of smaller places, called <i>topemes</i> .	2.2.2) Listening and Speaking In order to understand a place, we need to engage in a critical discussion with those in the place. In this way we can identify what matters in that place. But at the same time, we contribute to the construction of place.
	1.2.3) Trace Previous events and formulations of place are ‘remembered’ in the way that they are discernible to subjects	2.1.4) Aggregation How do places become meaningful? Places are holistic – having an independent meaning from their smaller <i>topemes</i> or from the larger places of which they themselves are <i>topemes</i> .	

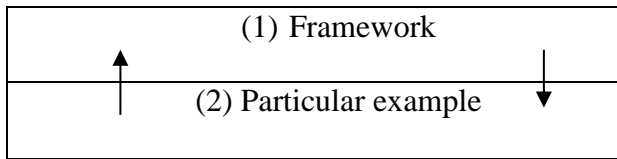
Figure 2 (pg. 47)



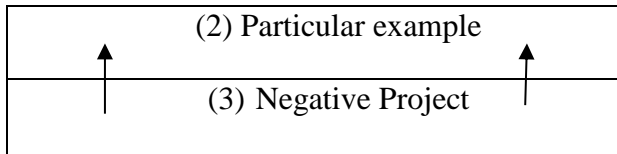
In order to do (1), it is necessary to first work from a particular example.



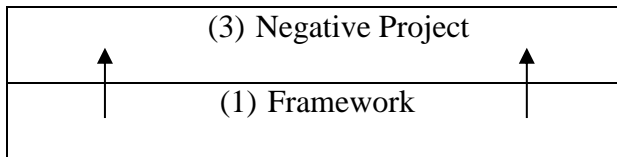
BUT, in order to do philosophy in a particular place (2), one must first assume a framework.



So, we have reflective equilibrium.

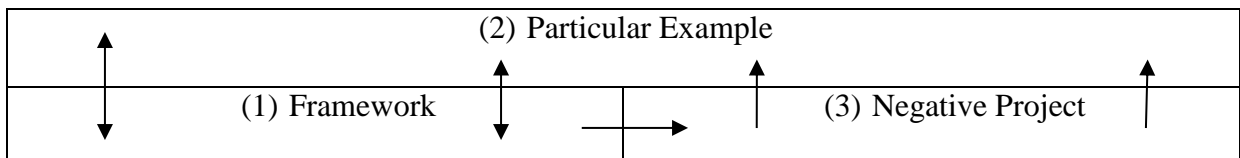


In order to do (2), we need to prove that what has been done so far has been ineffectual (3). (2) then requires that (3) be done so that we can be validated in doing (2).



But (3) requires that we work from (1).

So:



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