BEYOND ANTHROPOCENTRISM: TOWARDS AN AFRICAN ONTOLOGICAL RELATIONALISM FOR BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION AND PUBLIC HEALTH

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Abstract

The increasing convergence of biodiversity loss, ecosystem degradation, climate change, and emerging public health crises has exposed the inadequacy of prevailing anthropocentric approaches to environmental management and human well-being. Although contemporary scientific frameworks such as One Health and Planetary Health have significantly advanced interdisciplinary understanding of the interconnectedness of humans, animals, and ecosystems, they remain largely grounded in empirical and policy-oriented analyses with limited engagement with the deeper ontological assumptions that shape humanity's relationship with the natural world. This paper argues that the current ecological crisis is fundamentally an ontological crisis rooted in anthropocentric conceptions of reality that privilege human interests while reducing nature to an instrument of economic and technological exploitation. Employing the philosophical methods of critical analysis, hermeneutics, and comparative inquiry, the study reconstructs African metaphysics as a systematic relational ontology capable of providing an alternative philosophical framework for biodiversity conservation and public health. The major findings reveal that anthropocentrism constitutes an ontological error because it fragments the relational unity of existence; that biodiversity possesses ontological value as an expression of the plurality and richness of Being rather than merely instrumental or intrinsic value; and that public health is best understood as the harmonious flourishing of the entire community of life rather than simply the absence of disease. The study's principal theoretical contribution is the formulation of **African** *Ontological Relationalism, defined as the metaphysical doctrine that reality is constituted by a dynamic communion of interdependent beings whose existence, identity, and flourishing arise through relationships of complementarity and participation. Therefore, extending African metaphysical insights into contemporary debates on environmental philosophy, biodiversity conservation, and global health, the study provides a novel ontological foundation that complements existing scientific frameworks and offers a philosophically grounded paradigm for sustainable ecological governance, public health policy, and future interdisciplinary research.*

Keywords: African Metaphysics; African Ontological Relationalism; Anthropocentrism; Biodiversity Conservation; Public Health; Environmental Philosophy

Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented convergence of biodiversity loss, climate change, ecosystem degradation, and public health emergencies, revealing the profound interconnectedness between humanity and the natural world. Across the globe, forests are disappearing at alarming rates, species are becoming extinct at levels unprecedented in recorded history, freshwater ecosystems are deteriorating, and climate-related disasters continue to threaten both ecological stability and human well-being (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services [IPBES], 2019). Simultaneously, the emergence and re-emergence of zoonotic diseases, increasing antimicrobial resistance, environmental pollution, food insecurity, and climate-sensitive illnesses have reinforced the growing realization that the health of

human beings cannot be understood independently of the health of animals, ecosystems, and biodiversity (Cunningham, Scoones, & Wood, 2017; Zinsstag, Schelling, Waltner-Toews, & Tanner, 2011). These developments have stimulated renewed scholarly interest in integrated frameworks such as One Health and Planetary Health, both of which emphasize the interconnectedness of ecological and human systems (Munyua et al., 2021). Such frameworks represent an important departure from earlier biomedical paradigms by recognizing that environmental degradation directly influences human health outcomes. However, despite their interdisciplinary significance, these approaches remain predominantly empirical, scientific, and policy-driven. Comparatively, little attention has been devoted to the deeper philosophical assumptions that underlie humanity's relationship with nature. Consequently, the ontological foundations of contemporary environmental crises remain insufficiently explored.

Every environmental ethic presupposes an ontology. Human attitudes towards forests, rivers, animals, microorganisms, and ecosystems are ultimately shaped by fundamental assumptions concerning the nature of reality and humanity's place within it. Environmental exploitation is therefore not merely the consequence of technological advancement, economic globalization, or weak governance. These factors themselves reflect a deeper metaphysical orientation that conceives the human person as existing above, outside, or independently of the wider community of existence. From this perspective, the contemporary ecological crisis may be interpreted not simply as a crisis of environmental management but as a crisis of Being itself. This ontological orientation is commonly identified as anthropocentrism. Although anthropocentrism has assumed different forms throughout the history of Western philosophy, its central assumption remains that human beings possess superior moral and ontological status while the rest of nature derives its significance primarily from its usefulness to humanity (Norton, 1984). Reinforced by Cartesian dualism and the mechanistic worldview of the Scientific Revolution, anthropocentrism has profoundly influenced modern economic development, industrialization, scientific rationality, and technological progress (Bacon, 2000; Descartes, 1984). Within such a worldview, biodiversity is frequently evaluated according to its economic productivity, pharmaceutical potential, agricultural utility, or contribution to ecosystem services. Nature becomes an object of management rather than a participant in existence.

Increasingly, however, the limitations of anthropocentric thinking have become evident. Climate change, biodiversity decline, habitat destruction, pollution, and emerging infectious diseases reveal that humanity cannot flourish independently of the ecological systems upon which life depends (IPBES, 2019). Aldo Leopold's (1949) *Land Ethic* marked an important philosophical departure by arguing that humanity is "a plain member and citizen" of the biotic community rather than its conqueror. Similarly, *Deep Ecology* challenged the instrumental valuation of nature by affirming the intrinsic worth of all living beings (Naess, 1973). While these approaches significantly expanded environmental philosophy, they remained largely within Western conceptual categories and did not systematically engage African metaphysical traditions as possible ontological alternatives.

African philosophy offers such an alternative. Unlike dualistic metaphysical systems that separate humanity from nature, African metaphysics generally conceives reality as an indivisible community of interdependent beings united through relationships of participation, complementarity, and vital force (Mbiti, 1969; Ramose, 1999; Tempels, 1959; Kanu, 2016; Kanu, 2017). Existence is fundamentally relational. Human beings neither stand above nature nor exist independently of it; rather, they participate within a dynamic community embracing fellow humans, animals, plants, ancestors, spiritual realities, and the physical environment. Consequently, biodiversity is not merely

a collection of biological resources but an expression of the relational structure of Being itself. This relational understanding finds expression in numerous African philosophical traditions. Tempels' (1959) doctrine of vital force, Mbiti's (1969) philosophy of communal existence, Ramose's (1999) ontology of Ubuntu, Asouzu's (2007) complementary ontology of Ibuanyidanda, Tangwa's (2004) eco-bio-communitarianism, and Kanu's (2016) philosophy of Igwebuike all affirm, in different ways, that existence is constituted through interconnectedness rather than isolation. While these traditions differ in emphasis, they converge upon the conviction that reality is fundamentally relational and that authentic human flourishing depends upon maintaining harmonious relationships within the wider community of life. Building upon these insights, this paper introduces the concept of African Ontological Relationalism as its principal theoretical contribution. African Ontological Relationalism is understood here as the metaphysical doctrine that reality consists of a dynamic communion of interdependent beings whose existence, identity, intelligibility, and flourishing are constituted through relations of complementarity and participation within a unified order of Being. The framework synthesizes central insights from African metaphysical traditions into a coherent ontology capable of engaging contemporary debates in biodiversity conservation and public health.

Methodology

This study adopts a philosophical methodology grounded in analysis, hermeneutics, and comparative philosophical inquiry. Analysis as a philosophical method is employed to clarify the meanings and philosophical implications of key concepts such as ontology, anthropocentrism, biodiversity, relationality, flourishing, and public health. Since these concepts often carry different meanings across disciplines, philosophical clarification becomes essential for constructing a coherent theoretical framework. Also, hermeneutics is utilized to interpret selected African metaphysical traditions, paying particular attention to the philosophical significance of concepts such as vital force, Ubuntu, Ibuanyidanda, eco-bio-communitarianism, and Igwebuike. Rather than treating these concepts merely as cultural or religious beliefs, the study reconstructs them as expressions of a systematic ontology capable of addressing contemporary ecological challenges.

The study further employs comparative philosophical inquiry by placing African metaphysics in dialogue with dominant anthropocentric traditions in Western philosophy as well as selected perspectives in contemporary environmental ethics. This comparative engagement is neither intended to privilege one tradition over another nor to produce a simple synthesis. Rather, it seeks to demonstrate that African metaphysics offers conceptual resources capable of extending current philosophical debates on biodiversity conservation and public health beyond the limitations of anthropocentrism. Accordingly, the study is analytical, reconstructive, and normative. It does not present empirical findings but develops a philosophical framework intended to illuminate contemporary environmental and public health challenges through the lens of African metaphysical thought.

Anthropocentrism as an Ontological Error

The ecological crisis confronting contemporary humanity is frequently explained in terms of industrialization, population growth, technological expansion, climate change, and failures of environmental governance. While these explanations illuminate important empirical dimensions of environmental degradation, they often leave unquestioned the philosophical assumptions that make such patterns of exploitation appear rational and legitimate. Ecological destruction does not arise in an intellectual vacuum. Every mode of environmental practice presupposes a particular understanding of reality, of humanity's place within that reality, and of the moral status of the non-

human world. Consequently, the biodiversity crisis is not merely ecological or political; it is fundamentally ontological. Ontology concerns the nature of Being and the relationships that constitute existence (Heidegger, 1962). It seeks to answer questions concerning what exists, how beings relate to one another, and what it means for something to be. Environmental ethics, therefore, is necessarily grounded in ontology because ethical obligations towards nature depend upon prior assumptions regarding the status of nature itself. If the natural world is conceived merely as an assemblage of inert objects existing for human use, exploitation becomes philosophically defensible. Conversely, if reality is understood as an interconnected community of mutually dependent beings, environmental responsibility becomes an ontological imperative rather than simply a moral preference.

Anthropocentrism derives from the Greek words *anthropos* (human being) and *kentron* (centre), denoting a worldview that places humanity at the centre of existence. Philosophically, anthropocentrism maintains that human beings possess unique intrinsic worth, while the value of non-human beings is derivative and instrumental, measured principally by their usefulness to human interests (Norton, 1984). Such a worldview has exercised considerable influence upon Western intellectual history, shaping theological, philosophical, scientific, and economic understandings of humanity's relationship with nature. Although elements of anthropocentrism may be identified in aspects of classical Greek philosophy, particularly in Aristotle's hierarchical conception of nature, its most influential formulation emerged during the Scientific Revolution. Francis Bacon's vision of scientific inquiry encouraged the systematic investigation of nature for the purpose of improving the human condition through technological mastery (Bacon, 2000). Knowledge became power, and power increasingly implied control over the natural world. René Descartes further reinforced this orientation through his dualistic distinction between *res cogitans* (thinking substance) and *res extensa* (extended substance), thereby separating the rational human subject from the material world (Descartes, 1984). Nature consequently came to be understood as mechanistic matter devoid of intrinsic purposiveness, existing primarily as an object of rational manipulation. This metaphysical separation profoundly influenced the development of modernity. The Industrial Revolution, capitalist economic systems, technological innovation, and contemporary consumer culture all inherited assumptions that regard nature primarily as a resource to be managed, exploited, and commodified. Forests became timber reserves; rivers became water resources; animals became units of agricultural production; biodiversity became genetic capital; and ecosystems became providers of marketable services. Such language is not philosophically neutral. It reflects an ontology in which non-human beings possess significance only insofar as they contribute to human welfare (Rolston III, 2012).

The anthropocentric worldview has undoubtedly facilitated remarkable scientific and technological achievements. Advances in medicine, transportation, communication, agriculture, and industrial production have significantly improved human living conditions. Nevertheless, these achievements have also generated profound ecological consequences. Deforestation, habitat fragmentation, biodiversity loss, pollution, desertification, climate change, and the overexploitation of natural resources reveal the limitations of an ontology founded upon domination rather than participation (IPBES, 2019). Ironically, the very worldview intended to promote human flourishing increasingly threatens the ecological systems upon which human survival depends. The central weakness of anthropocentrism lies in its fragmentation of reality. Its attempt to separate humanity from nature, subject from object, culture from environment, and mind from matter, constructs a series of dualisms that obscure the interconnectedness characterizing living systems (Plumwood, 2002).

Such dualistic thinking encourages the illusion of human autonomy while ignoring the ecological dependence that makes human life possible. Humanity appears as an independent agent confronting an external environment rather than as a participant within an integrated community of existence. This fragmentation is not merely conceptual; it has practical consequences. Contemporary biodiversity loss illustrates that the destruction of ecological systems inevitably rebounds upon humanity through declining food security, emerging zoonotic diseases, climate instability, and deteriorating public health (Cunningham, Scoones, & Wood, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the intimate relationship between environmental degradation, wildlife exploitation, and human vulnerability, demonstrating that ecological imbalance ultimately becomes a human crisis. These developments reveal the paradox of anthropocentrism: in seeking to elevate humanity above nature, it undermines the very ecological foundations upon which human flourishing depends.

Environmental philosophers have long recognized the inadequacies of anthropocentrism. Leopold's (1949) *Land Ethic* proposed that humans should regard themselves as "plain members and citizens" of the biotic community rather than its conquerors. Naess (1973) advanced *Deep Ecology* by arguing that every living being possesses intrinsic worth independent of human utility, while Rolston III (2012) defended the objective value of biodiversity within environmental ethics. These perspectives represent significant advances beyond narrow anthropocentrism because they challenge the exclusive privileging of human interests. Yet these approaches remain incomplete from the standpoint of African philosophy. Their primary concern is ethical, expanding the moral community to include non-human nature. They devote comparatively less attention to reconstructing the ontology upon which ethical obligations depend. African metaphysics begins precisely at this point. Rather than asking merely who deserves moral consideration, it asks a prior question: What is the nature of Being? It is this ontological inquiry that enables African philosophy to move beyond both anthropocentrism and ecocentrism towards a relational understanding of existence. African philosophy rejects the assumption that reality consists of isolated entities arranged hierarchically according to human interests. Instead, it understands existence as fundamentally relational, participatory, and complementary (Mbiti, 1969; Ramose, 1999; Asouzu, 2007; Kanu 2016; Kanu, 2017; Ndubisi, 2020; Chemhuru, (2024; Kyei-Nuamah & Peng, 2024). Human beings are not external observers of nature but participants within a dynamic community embracing fellow humans, non-human life, ancestors, spiritual realities, and the physical environment. The fragmentation characteristic of anthropocentric ontology is therefore regarded as metaphysically false because it misconceives the very structure of reality.

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that anthropocentrism should be understood not simply as an inadequate environmental ethic but as an ontological error. It misrepresents the nature of existence by privileging human autonomy over relationality, domination over participation, and separation over communion. Consequently, environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and public health crises are not accidental by-products of modern civilization but logical consequences of a defective ontology. Overcoming these crises therefore requires more than technological innovation or policy reform; it requires a fundamental reorientation in humanity's understanding of Being. African metaphysics offers precisely such an alternative, and it is to this constructive vision that the discussion now turns.

African Metaphysics of Life: Towards an African Ontological Relationalism

Having argued that anthropocentrism represents an ontological error grounded in the fragmentation of reality, the task now is to articulate an alternative metaphysical framework capable of addressing the philosophical roots of contemporary ecological crises. African philosophy provides such an alternative through its understanding of Being as fundamentally relational, participatory, and dynamic. Unlike anthropocentric ontology, which conceives reality as a hierarchy of independent entities centred upon human interests, African metaphysics understands existence as an indivisible communion of beings whose identities, meanings, and flourishing emerge through relationships of complementarity and mutual participation. This relational conception of Being is neither accidental nor peripheral within African philosophy. It constitutes one of its defining metaphysical orientations. Although African philosophical traditions are diverse and cannot be reduced to a single system, they exhibit remarkable convergence in their understanding of reality as an interconnected whole. Whether expressed through Bantu ontology, Akan conceptions of personhood, Ubuntu philosophy, Ibuanyidanda, Igwebuike, or Eco-bio-communitarianism, African metaphysical reflection consistently rejects atomistic conceptions of existence in favour of relationality, communal participation, and ontological interdependence (Asouzu, 2007; Mbiti, 1969; Ramose, 1999; Kanu, 2016).

This understanding of relationality receives more systematic philosophical elaboration in Mogobe Ramose's (1999) interpretation of Ubuntu. Ramose argues that Ubuntu should not be understood merely as an ethical principle encouraging compassion or generosity. Rather, Ubuntu is a philosophy of Being itself. Reality is characterized by being, a continuous process of becoming-with others. Human existence is therefore inseparable from the existence of the wider community. Ontology precedes ethics because ethical responsibility arises naturally from the relational structure of existence. An equally significant contribution emerges from Innocent Asouzu's (2007) philosophy of Ibuanyidanda, perhaps one of the most sophisticated contemporary reconstructions of African metaphysics. Rejecting every form of reductionism, Asouzu argues that reality consists of complementary "missing links," each indispensable for the realization of the whole. No entity possesses absolute autonomy or complete self-sufficiency. Every existent contributes something unique to the comprehensive order of Being while simultaneously depending upon others for its own realization. Complementarity is therefore not merely cooperation among independent beings but the ontological principle through which reality itself becomes intelligible. Similarly, Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu's (2016; 2017) philosophy of Igwebuike reinforces this relational orientation. Literally understood as "there is strength in number," Igwebuike extends beyond social cooperation to express an ontology of interconnectedness in which plurality does not threaten unity but enriches it. Diversity is not an obstacle to existence but one of the conditions of its fullness. Within this framework, every being acquires significance through participation within a larger network of relationships. This insight possesses profound implications for biodiversity because ecological diversity itself becomes an expression of ontological richness rather than merely biological variation.

African environmental philosophy has already begun to recognise some of these implications. Godfrey Tangwa's (2004) theory of Eco-bio-communitarianism argues that African worldviews traditionally perceive human beings as members of an extended community embracing both human and non-human life. Tangwa's contribution represents one of the earliest systematic African philosophical responses to environmental ethics and deserves recognition for challenging anthropocentric assumptions within global ecological discourse. Kyei-Nuamah & Peng (2024)

argue that Ubuntu can guide ecological education and policy, emphasizing humanness, collectivism, and eco-communitarianism. Nevertheless, Eco-bio-communitarianism remains primarily an ethical framework concerned with environmental responsibility. The present study seeks to move one step further by asking the ontological question that underlies environmental ethics itself: What conception of Being makes ecological responsibility intelligible? It is at this point that the present study advances its principal theoretical contribution through the formulation of African Ontological Relationalism.

African Ontological Relationalism may be defined as the metaphysical doctrine that reality consists of a dynamic communion of interdependent beings whose existence, identity, intelligibility, and flourishing are constituted through relationships of complementarity, participation, and reciprocal dependence within a unified order of Being. Within this framework, relationality is not merely an ethical ideal or social value but the very structure of existence itself. Several philosophical implications follow from this definition. First, being is fundamentally relational rather than substantial. Entities do not first exist independently before entering into relationships; rather, relationships themselves constitute the conditions under which beings become intelligible. Identity emerges through participation rather than isolation. Second, reality is complementary rather than competitive. Diversity is not evidence of fragmentation but an expression of ontological richness. Every being contributes uniquely to the flourishing of the whole, and no entity can be dismissed as metaphysically insignificant. Third, existence is participatory rather than hierarchical. Human beings occupy a distinctive place within reality because of their rational and moral capacities, but this distinctiveness does not confer absolute domination over other beings. Humanity participates within, rather than governs from above, the community of existence. Fourth, flourishing is communal rather than individualistic. Authentic well-being is realised only when harmonious relationships exist among human beings, non-human life, ecosystems, and the wider spiritual order. Individual flourishing detached from ecological flourishing represents an ontological contradiction because it ignores the relational conditions that make existence possible.

These propositions distinguish African Ontological Relationalism from both anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. Anthropocentrism privileges humanity as the centre of existence, while ecocentrism frequently locates primary value within ecosystems themselves. African Ontological Relationalism adopts neither position. Instead, it proposes that relation itself constitutes the primary ontological reality. Value arises not because something is human or because something belongs to nature, but because every being participates within the dynamic communion of Being.

The philosophical significance of this reconstruction extends beyond African philosophy. Contemporary discussions of biodiversity, environmental ethics, sustainability, and public health increasingly recognise the interconnectedness of ecological systems, yet they often lack an explicit metaphysical account of why such interconnectedness matters. African Ontological Relationalism provides precisely this missing foundation. It explains that biodiversity is not valuable merely because ecosystems function efficiently or because human beings derive benefits from nature. Biodiversity is valuable because the plurality of life constitutes the relational richness through which Being manifests itself.

Biodiversity and Public Health through African Ontological Relationalism

The reconstruction of African metaphysics undertaken in the preceding section provides the ontological foundation for rethinking two of the most pressing challenges of the contemporary

world: biodiversity conservation and public health. These concerns are often treated as distinct academic and policy domains, the former belonging primarily to environmental science and conservation biology, and the latter to medicine and public health. Increasingly, however, scientific research demonstrates that the health of humans, animals, and ecosystems is deeply interconnected (Whitmee et al., 2015; Zinsstag et al., 2011). While these interdisciplinary approaches have significantly enriched contemporary scholarship, they frequently lack an explicit philosophical account of why such interconnectedness exists. African Ontological Relationalism supplies this missing metaphysical foundation by interpreting biodiversity and public health as complementary expressions of the same relational order of Being.

Conventionally, biodiversity is defined as the variability among living organisms at the genetic, species, and ecosystem levels (Convention on Biological Diversity [CBD], 1992). This definition has become the standard within conservation biology and environmental governance. Nevertheless, it remains largely descriptive. It explains what biodiversity is without adequately addressing why biodiversity possesses fundamental significance beyond its ecological functions or economic utility. Much of contemporary environmental policy continues to justify biodiversity conservation by appealing to ecosystem services, pharmaceutical discoveries, agricultural productivity, climate regulation, or economic sustainability (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Such arguments, though practically important, remain vulnerable to anthropocentric reasoning because they value biodiversity primarily in terms of its usefulness to humanity.

African Ontological Relationalism proposes a more fundamental account. If reality is constituted through a communion of interdependent beings, then biodiversity is not merely an assemblage of biological entities but the concrete manifestation of ontological plurality. Diversity is intrinsic to the structure of Being itself. Every species, ecosystem, and ecological relationship contributes uniquely to the richness and intelligibility of existence. Consequently, biodiversity possesses **ontological value** before it possesses economic, scientific, or instrumental value. The disappearance of species therefore represents not merely ecological loss but a diminishment of the relational fullness through which Being discloses itself. This interpretation resonates strongly with Asouzu's (2007) complementary ontology. Within Asouzu's Ibuanyidanda philosophy, every being functions as a "missing link" whose significance becomes fully intelligible only within the comprehensive totality of existence. Applied to ecological systems, this means that no organism is metaphysically insignificant. Whether microorganisms, insects, plants, amphibians, mammals, or human beings, every form of life participates in sustaining the relational equilibrium that makes existence possible. Biodiversity conservation is therefore not simply the protection of natural resources but the preservation of the ontological integrity of the community of Being.

Similarly, Tempels' (1959) conception of vital force suggests that life should not be understood as an isolated biological phenomenon but as a dynamic continuum permeating the cosmos. Every living being participates in this life-generating force, and the flourishing of one dimension of reality contributes to the flourishing of the whole. Environmental degradation weakens these life-sustaining relationships by disrupting the dynamic interactions through which vital force circulates. From this perspective, ecological destruction constitutes not merely environmental damage but a disturbance of the ontological conditions necessary for life's continuity. The implications of this ontology become particularly evident when examined alongside contemporary public health. Traditional biomedical models have understandably concentrated upon diagnosing disease, treating

illness, and prolonging human life. Yet the increasing prevalence of zoonotic diseases, antimicrobial resistance, climate-related illnesses, and environmentally induced health conditions has exposed the limitations of approaches that isolate human health from ecological systems (Whitmee et al., 2015). The One Health paradigm has emerged in response to these limitations by emphasizing that the health of humans, animals, and ecosystems constitutes an integrated whole rather than separate domains of concern (Zinsstag et al., 2011).

African Ontological Relationalism deepens the philosophical significance of One Health by demonstrating that such interconnectedness is not merely biological but ontological. Human health depends upon biodiversity because both participate within the same relational order of Being. Healthy ecosystems regulate climate, purify water, sustain food systems, maintain soil fertility, preserve pollinators, and reduce opportunities for pathogen spillover. Conversely, ecological disruption increases the likelihood of emerging infectious diseases, food insecurity, environmental displacement, and mental health challenges associated with ecological instability (IPBES, 2019). These relationships are not accidental correlations; they are manifestations of an underlying ontological unity. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a particularly compelling illustration of this unity. Although initially addressed as a biomedical emergency, subsequent research has demonstrated that the emergence of SARS-CoV-2 cannot be adequately understood apart from broader patterns of habitat destruction, wildlife exploitation, land-use change, and increased human encroachment into natural ecosystems (Cunningham, Scoones, & Wood, 2017). The pandemic therefore revealed a truth long recognised within African metaphysics: human beings cannot violate the integrity of the ecological community without simultaneously undermining their own well-being. Public health crises frequently arise where the relational equilibrium of existence has been disrupted. This insight finds practical expression within many African indigenous ecological traditions. Across numerous African societies, sacred forests, protected rivers, ritual restrictions, seasonal harvesting regulations, and totemic practices historically functioned as mechanisms for preserving ecological balance (Tangwa, 2004; Mbiti, 1969). Such institutions were not merely religious customs nor irrational superstitions. Rather, they embodied a sophisticated ontological understanding that recognised the mutual dependence of human communities and the natural environment. Respect for biodiversity emerged not simply from utilitarian calculation but from the conviction that every component of nature participates within the wider community of life.

Contemporary conservation science increasingly acknowledges the importance of Indigenous and local knowledge systems in biodiversity governance. Nevertheless, African Ontological Relationalism suggests that the value of these traditions extends beyond empirical ecological knowledge. Their enduring significance lies in the metaphysical worldview that sustains them, a worldview in which human beings understand themselves as participants rather than proprietors of existence. Such an ontology nurtures environmental responsibility because it regards ecological care as fidelity to the very structure of Being. This relational perspective also transforms the meaning of public health itself. Health cannot be reduced to the absence of disease or the efficient functioning of biological systems. Rather, health is the harmonious flourishing of persons within healthy communities, healthy ecosystems, and a healthy biosphere. It encompasses physical well-being, ecological integrity, social justice, cultural continuity, food security, environmental sustainability, and spiritual equilibrium. Public health therefore becomes an ontological condition

before it becomes a biomedical achievement. Wherever relationships among human beings, nature, and the wider community of life are sustained, conditions favourable to health emerge; wherever these relationships are systematically disrupted, disease and ecological decline become increasingly probable.

Towards an African Ontology of Ecological Flourishing

The foregoing analysis has demonstrated that the contemporary crises of biodiversity loss and public health are not isolated phenomena but interconnected manifestations of a deeper ontological disorder. Anthropocentric conceptions of reality have encouraged patterns of domination that fragment the unity of existence, reduce nature to an instrument of human utility, and obscure the relational conditions upon which both ecological integrity and human well-being depend. If the roots of these crises are ontological, then their long-term resolution demands more than technological innovation, legislative reforms, or economic incentives. It requires a philosophical transformation in humanity's understanding of Being. Such a transformation is what this study describes as an African Ontology of Ecological Flourishing.

Ecological flourishing, as conceived within African Ontological Relationalism, is neither synonymous with economic development nor reducible to environmental conservation. Rather, it denotes the harmonious realization of life through the preservation and enhancement of the relational order of Being. Flourishing occurs when human beings, non-human life, ecosystems, and the spiritual dimensions of existence participate in relationships of reciprocity, complementarity, and mutual care. It is therefore an ontological condition before it is an economic or political achievement. Sustainable societies emerge not merely through technological efficiency but through fidelity to the relational structure that constitutes reality itself. This understanding challenges dominant development paradigms that continue to evaluate progress primarily through economic indicators such as gross domestic product, industrial productivity, or technological expansion. While such measures remain important, they frequently obscure the ecological costs at which economic growth is achieved. Development that destroys biodiversity, degrades ecosystems, contaminates water resources, or undermines public health ultimately contradicts the very purpose of development because it erodes the ontological conditions necessary for human flourishing. African Ontological Relationalism therefore calls for a reconceptualization of development as the enhancement of the entire community of Being rather than the accumulation of material wealth by human societies alone. This perspective resonates with contemporary international efforts to integrate sustainability into development discourse, particularly the aspiration expressed in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to balance economic prosperity, social inclusion, and environmental protection (United Nations, 2015). Nevertheless, African Ontological Relationalism extends beyond the SDGs by providing a metaphysical justification for sustainability. Environmental protection is not merely a policy objective or a strategy for securing future human welfare; it is a philosophical obligation arising from the relational nature of existence itself. Human beings preserve biodiversity because they are ontologically constituted through the very relationships that biodiversity sustains.

An important implication of this ontology concerns environmental governance. Contemporary conservation policies often emphasize legal regulation, protected areas, technological monitoring, and scientific management. While these instruments remain indispensable, their long-term effectiveness depends upon the philosophical worldview that informs human behaviour. Environmental laws may regulate conduct, but they cannot by themselves cultivate ecological

consciousness. African societies historically developed mechanisms of environmental stewardship through sacred forests, totemic systems, communal ownership of natural resources, ritual prohibitions, and customary ecological practices (Mbiti, 1969; Tangwa, 2004). Although these institutions evolved within particular historical contexts, their enduring significance lies in the ontological conviction that humanity belongs to, rather than dominates, the community of life.

Consequently, contemporary environmental governance in Africa should seek a creative integration of scientific conservation with indigenous metaphysical wisdom. Such integration does not imply the uncritical revival of every traditional practice, nor does it romanticize precolonial societies. Rather, it recognizes that African philosophical traditions contain conceptual resources capable of enriching modern environmental policy. Scientific knowledge explains ecological processes with remarkable precision, while African metaphysics provides the ontological orientation that motivates responsible participation within those processes. Together they offer a more comprehensive foundation for biodiversity conservation than either perspective can provide independently. The implications of African Ontological Relationalism extend equally to public health. Increasingly, scholars of global health acknowledge that environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, food insecurity, and climate change significantly influence patterns of disease and human well-being (Whitmee et al., 2015). The One Health and Planetary Health paradigms have already highlighted the interconnectedness of these phenomena. African Ontological Relationalism deepens this conversation by arguing that health is fundamentally relational. Human health is not an isolated biological state but an expression of harmonious participation within healthy ecological, social, cultural, and spiritual relationships. Public health policy should therefore incorporate environmental restoration, biodiversity conservation, sustainable agriculture, climate resilience, and the preservation of Indigenous ecological knowledge as integral dimensions of preventive healthcare rather than as external environmental concerns.

Education likewise becomes a critical instrument of ontological transformation. Much of contemporary education continues, often unintentionally, to reinforce anthropocentric assumptions by presenting nature primarily as a repository of resources for economic exploitation. African philosophy invites an alternative educational vision in which ecological responsibility emerges from an understanding of humanity's relational identity. Educational curricula at all levels should therefore encourage dialogue between modern science and African philosophical thought, cultivating environmental literacy alongside metaphysical reflection. Such an approach prepares future generations not only to manage ecosystems effectively but also to appreciate the ontological significance of biodiversity as a constitutive dimension of human existence. This educational transformation also carries important implications for philosophical scholarship itself. African philosophy has often been interpreted either as the documentation of indigenous worldviews or as the critique of Western intellectual traditions. While both tasks remain valuable, contemporary African philosophy increasingly bears the responsibility of generating constructive theoretical frameworks capable of addressing global challenges. African Ontological Relationalism represents one such effort. It does not reject scientific knowledge, nor does it oppose Western philosophy. Instead, it contributes an original metaphysical perspective through which contemporary debates concerning biodiversity, sustainability, and public health may be reconsidered. In this respect, the study participates in the broader project of decolonising knowledge by demonstrating that African metaphysical traditions are not merely objects of historical inquiry but living intellectual resources for global philosophical discourse.

Conclusion

The accelerating crises of biodiversity loss, ecological degradation, climate change, and emerging public health challenges have increasingly revealed the limitations of conceptual frameworks that regard humanity as existing independently of the natural world. While contemporary scientific paradigms such as One Health and Planetary Health have significantly advanced interdisciplinary understanding of the interdependence between human, animal, and environmental health, they remain largely concerned with empirical relationships and policy interventions. This study has argued that these crises ultimately possess a deeper philosophical dimension. They are manifestations of an ontological disorder rooted in anthropocentric conceptions of reality that privilege human beings while fragmenting the relational unity of existence. Against this background, the study has proposed African metaphysics as a constructive philosophical alternative. Through a critical engagement with African metaphysical traditions, including the concepts of vital force, communal existence, Ubuntu, Ibuanyidanda, Igwebuike, and Eco-bio-communitarianism, it has demonstrated that African philosophy consistently conceives reality as a dynamic communion of interdependent beings whose existence is constituted through participation, complementarity, and relationality. Unlike anthropocentric ontology, which separates humanity from nature, African metaphysics affirms that human flourishing is inseparable from the flourishing of the wider community of life.

The principal theoretical contribution of this study lies in the formulation of African Ontological Relationalism as a systematic metaphysical framework for understanding biodiversity conservation and public health. African Ontological Relationalism has been defined as the doctrine that reality consists of a dynamic communion of interdependent beings whose existence, identity, intelligibility, and flourishing arise through relationships of complementarity and reciprocal participation within a unified order of Being. In advancing this framework, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts of African environmental thought and reconstructs diverse African philosophical traditions into a coherent ontological paradigm capable of engaging contemporary global debates. This reconstruction has generated three interconnected philosophical claims. First, it has shown that anthropocentrism is fundamentally an ontological error rather than merely an ethical deficiency because it misconceives the relational structure of existence. Second, it has argued that biodiversity possesses ontological value, since the plurality of life constitutes an essential expression of the richness, complementarity, and intelligibility of Being itself. Third, it has demonstrated that public health should be understood not simply as the absence of disease but as the harmonious flourishing of persons, communities, ecosystems, and the broader community of life. These claims collectively reposition biodiversity conservation and public health within the domain of metaphysics, thereby extending contemporary environmental philosophy beyond the limits of anthropocentric and exclusively ecocentric paradigms.

The implications of this framework extend beyond theoretical philosophy. African Ontological Relationalism provides a conceptual foundation for reimagining environmental governance, sustainable development, biodiversity conservation, health policy, and ecological education. It challenges development models that pursue economic growth at the expense of ecological integrity and instead advocates a vision of development measured by the flourishing of the entire community of Being. In doing so, the framework encourages greater dialogue between African philosophy, environmental science, public health, and global sustainability studies, demonstrating that philosophical reflection remains indispensable to addressing the ecological challenges of the twenty-first century.

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