

**AFRICAN HUMANISM AND THE ETHICS OF TECHNOLOGICAL MODERNITY:
RETHINKING THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY**

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Abstract

The moral vision of African humanism offers a distinctive way of thinking about the technological age one that neither romanticizes the past nor surrenders to the machinery of progress. At its heart lies a conviction that being human is a shared condition, grounded in relationship and care. This essay revisits that conviction in the context of rapid digital expansion, artificial intelligence, and the strange acceleration of everyday life. It asks whether technology, when stripped of ethical grounding, becomes another form of colonization, one that enters not through armies but through code and data. Drawing on thinkers such as Wiredu, Eboh, Gyekye, and Ramose, the paper considers how African philosophy might help reimagine technology as something lived rather than merely used. The argument unfolds through reflection rather than system: it circles questions of personhood, moral responsibility, and the fate of communal values in a world mediated by algorithms. African humanism, in this light, is not nostalgia but resistance a call to return technology to the service of life. It invites a reconsideration of what progress means when measured against the moral textures of community, dignity, and ecological balance. The essay suggests that this ethical reorientation is necessary if humanity is to inhabit modernity without losing itself.

Keywords: African philosophy; humanism; technology; modernity; Ubuntu

Introduction

There is a quiet tension in bringing a philosophy shaped in the village square into dialogue with the logic of algorithms and machine learning. Yet that is precisely where African thought now finds itself confronted by a modernity that claims inevitability while concealing its moral costs. Technology, for much of the global North, appears as destiny. In much of Africa, it feels more like intrusion, sometimes even repetition: another wave of transformation arriving with promises of inclusion but demanding obedience to foreign rhythms of life.

Still, resistance is not refusal. It would be naive to treat technology as something external to human culture. It is, instead, an extension of it one that can illuminate as easily as it can obscure. What concerns philosophers such as Wiredu (1996) is not the presence of modern tools but the uncritical absorption of alien frameworks of thought. He warns that such absorption can recreate domination at the level of concepts rather than politics. Eboh (2019), writing from a similar concern, argues that the true task of African philosophy is to confront modernity's moral fractures by restoring ethical depth to reason itself.

To begin there is to admit that technology is never neutral. It embodies choices about what kind of lives are worth living and which are expendable. African philosophy, rooted in the language of relation, offers a way to ask different questions: not how to control the machine, but how to ensure it continues to serve life.

The Relational Ground of African Humanism: Nuances and Debates

To approach African humanism is to step into a conversation that resists closure. It begins with a deceptively simple idea that personhood is not given at birth but forged within the fabric of community. This idea unsettles many Western assumptions about the self. Gyekye (2010) and Ramose (2009) remind us that, in much of African thought, existence is not a private possession but a shared emergence. The Zulu phrase *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* “a person is a person through other persons” is not moral ornamentation; it is an ontological statement.

Such a worldview redefines ethics. To act well is not merely to follow a rule but to sustain the rhythm of communal life. Gyekye (2010) calls this a “moderate communitarianism,” a vision in which individual dignity coexists with collective responsibility. He insists that the moral life of a society depends on both: the community provides identity, but the individual, through virtue and reflection, upholds its integrity. The person, then, is both participant and custodian, not a dissolving atom within the group.

Menkiti (1984) presses the argument further. He maintains that one becomes a person by participating fully in social and moral life. Personhood, in his account, is achieved rather than assumed. The newborn, he writes, is a promise of personhood, not yet its embodiment. In this sense, moral growth is inseparable from social recognition a claim that challenges liberal notions of the autonomous individual.

Ramose (2009) moves beyond moral prescription to ontology itself. For him, *Ubuntu* is not simply a virtue; it is the very texture of being. To exist is to exist-with. Separation is illusion. If this is true, technologies that fragment or commodify relationships are not just socially harmful but metaphysically dissonant they violate the structure of being. These views do not converge neatly. Gyekye’s moderation values critical individuality, while Menkiti and Ramose articulate a radical relationism that risks subsuming it. Yet it is precisely in this tension that African humanism’s strength lies. It keeps the self and the community in dialogue, refusing to let either become absolute.

Eboh (2019) reads this conversation as the moral center of African philosophy: a continuous effort to preserve the human person as the measure of all value in a world increasingly seduced by abstraction and market logic. In his view, the real challenge of modernity is not technological dependence itself but the erosion of moral memory the forgetting of what it means to live for and with others.

African humanism, then, is not a fixed doctrine. It is a habit of thought, a way of feeling toward life. It holds that knowledge divorced from compassion, or progress detached from community, is impoverished. To speak of personhood in this sense is to speak of relationship, reciprocity, and care. It is to assert that a good life cannot be lived alone, and that the question of technology must therefore always return to the question of belonging.

The Dislocating Force of Technological Modernity

If African humanism begins with relation, technological modernity often begins with rupture. The contemporary world moves at a velocity that strains the connective tissue of social life. Machines think, data predicts, and the human figure flickers between visibility and disappearance. Tangwa (2004) cautions that when technological growth outpaces moral reflection, alienation and ecological decay follow. The tool remakes its user, sometimes without consent.

Dislocation takes many forms. It is spatial, when the screen connects continents yet estranges neighbours. It is temporal, when digital time obliterates rest, imposing the endless simultaneity of updates and notifications. And it is ontological, when a person’s presence is scattered across avatars, profiles, and algorithmic traces that never quite amount to a self.

From an African standpoint, such fragmentation is not merely technical but moral. The legacy of modernization already carries a history of dispossession. Oguejiofor (2010) describes the “African predicament” as the gap between the promises of progress and the lived experience of dependency. Today, those promises reappear in digital form efficiency, connection, inclusion yet the underlying asymmetry remains. African markets become testing grounds for imported systems, and African data becomes raw material for distant corporations.

The logic that drives this process is what some scholars now call data colonialism. It extends extraction into the terrain of human life itself harvesting behaviour, emotion, and attention as resources for profit. The person, once understood

through relationship, becomes a set of metrics. The danger is subtle: domination now hides behind consent. We accept surveillance in exchange for convenience, unaware that the exchange empties autonomy of meaning.

The ethical stakes here are profound. When artificial intelligence and predictive analytics are built on biased datasets, they replicate social hierarchies under the guise of objectivity. Algorithmic decisions about credit, employment, or security reproduce exclusion in digital form. What appears as innovation often replays old injustices through new infrastructures.

African philosophy invites a different vocabulary for these experiences. Dislocation, in this context, is not only spatial or psychological it is a wound in relational being. To speak of *Ubuntu* in the digital age is to ask whether technology can still honour the continuity between person, community, and environment. Can a world built on speed and competition sustain the moral patience that communal life requires? It is not entirely clear that it can.

Progress, in the language of humanism, must be judged not by output but by harmony by the quality of connection and the depth of care. This requires a metric of development that measures not how much is produced, but how fully life is sustained. Without such a reorientation, we risk what might be called *connected solitude*: crowds linked by signal yet divided by meaning.

African philosophy cannot accept technological modernity as neutral. Every device, every platform, carries a moral geometry a shape that includes some and excludes others. To humanize that geometry is the task before us. It begins, perhaps, by remembering that the purpose of innovation is not novelty but nourishment, not escape from limitation but the enrichment of shared life.

Reframing Technology: From Instrument to Life-World

African humanism does not oppose technology. It asks for something subtler: that tools remain tethered to the moral imagination of the people who use them. The question is not whether to innovate, but how to do so without losing sight of what makes life humane. Gyekye (2010) argues that knowledge itself becomes ethical when pursued for communal flourishing rather than domination. This stance reframes invention as participation in a moral order, not as conquest of material reality.

In much of Western thought, technology has long been imagined as an instrument, a neutral extension of human will. It is something to be wielded, not inhabited. Yet such a view, though powerful, is misleading. The tools we make, as philosophers like Wiredu (1996) remind us, also make us. They shape the habits of perception and the range of what feels possible. Wiredu's call for "conceptual decolonization" is therefore not antiquarian. It is an invitation to sift imported frameworks, to adapt them through one's own ethical vocabulary before they quietly define the terms of life.

To view technology through the lens of humanism is to question the assumption of neutrality. No tool is without intention. Every design implies an idea of what a human being is for. The smartphone, for example, privileges immediacy; the algorithm privileges prediction. What values do such priorities cultivate, and which do they erode? These are not technical questions. They belong to ethics, to philosophy, to the quiet labour of reflection that modern life too easily neglects.

A humanized technology, in this sense, must be measured by its appropriateness, its fit within the moral, ecological, and cultural rhythms of a people. A tool that amplifies greed or isolation, however efficient, cannot be appropriate in Gyekye's sense. Nor can one that exhausts the land or disrupts the bonds between generations. The idea is not romantic conservatism; it is moral realism. Every society has thresholds of balance beyond which innovation becomes self-destructive.

This balance is evident in the African worldview that sees continuity between the human, the natural, and the spiritual. Tangwa (2004) notes that this orientation contrasts sharply with the Western impulse to dominate nature. If being is relational, then technologies that sever that relation threaten being itself. To build ethically is therefore to build in harmony with both environment and community, to treat innovation as care rather than conquest.

Imagining what this might look like in practice, one could think of a digital platform designed with *Ubuntu* principles in mind. It might value conversation over competition, deliberation over distraction. It might slow communication just

enough to allow for reflection, or encourage dialogue between generations rather than polarization between strangers. Its success would be measured not in clicks or capital but in the quality of understanding it nurtures. This is not utopian fantasy. It is an act of ethical imagination, a reminder that design, too, can express a worldview.

The practical implementation of this ethical reframing is already emerging in nascent forms. Beyond conceptual models, 'resistance' and 'reclamation' manifest in tangible practices: the development of community-owned mesh networks that prioritize local communication over global extraction; digital archives built around indigenous knowledge protocols that respect context and custodianship, not just open access; and the integration of 'ethics-by-design' workshops into tech hubs, where developers are challenged to evaluate projects against *Ubuntu* principles like solidarity and relational harmony. These are not futuristic ideals but present-day experiments in building an alternative technological life-world from the ground up.

In the end, reframing technology means acknowledging that every invention is a moral proposition. Each device asks, implicitly, what kind of world we wish to inhabit. African humanism answers by insisting that the good life is relational and that knowledge, to be worthy of the name, must preserve that relation. The challenge, then, is not to abandon technology but to return it to the service of life to build machines that remember the hands that made them and the communities they are meant to sustain.

Resistance and the Reclamation of Moral Agency

Every philosophy of liberation begins with refusal, though not always with rejection. To resist, in the African humanist sense, is to think again to look beneath the glitter of progress and ask who commands the narrative of improvement. Eboh (2019) insists that African philosophy must reclaim moral agency by confronting technological modernity not as an adversary, but as a moral question. Resistance, then, becomes a form of discernment: the ability to say *no* where reason or justice demands it, and *yes* only where life can still breathe.

Higgs (2012) takes this further in the context of education, describing decolonization as a radical redefinition of what counts as knowledge. His point, arguably, extends to technology itself. The act of redefinition is already a form of freedom. When the terms of value are set elsewhere when innovation means only efficiency, when data means only profit the philosopher's task is to interrupt the language of inevitability.

This interruption need not be loud. It might begin with small refusals: the refusal to treat human attention as currency, or to equate speed with intelligence. Ani (2018) reminds us that in African ethics, tools must never override the moral worth of persons. When efficiency becomes a god, dignity becomes expendable. The question, he writes, is not simply what can be built, but whether the building enlarges or diminishes life.

Such resistance depends on what Eboh (2019) calls *intellectual sovereignty* the right of African thought to set its own moral agenda in dialogue with, but not in submission to, global paradigms. Intellectual sovereignty does not reject influence; it filters it. It accepts what resonates with communal well-being and reshapes what does not. It insists that innovation, like culture, must grow from within, not be imported wholesale from laboratories that have never walked African soil.

A potential counterargument posits that the relentless efficiency and scale of global technological platforms are indispensable for economic development and connectivity in Africa. This view, however, conflates technological presence with technological sovereignty. We do not advocate for a rejection of global tools, but for a critical engagement that prevents their inherent values from becoming hegemonic. The goal is to ask not if a technology works, but what kind of social and moral world it builds as it works. A focus on relational well-being does not preclude economic growth; rather, it insists that growth must be measured by its contribution to shared flourishing, not just its GDP metrics. An efficient system that erodes community trust and ecological balance is, from a humanist perspective, a fundamentally inefficient one.

This sovereignty also demands a revision of language. The vocabulary of modern technology "disruption," "scaling," "user engagement" is rarely neutral. It carries hidden assumptions about progress and power. To speak otherwise is itself a political act. An *Ubuntu*-informed lexicon might instead ask whether a technology is "life-affirming," "appropriate," or "community-building." Such words return ethical weight to technical discourse. They make moral reflection audible again.

Still, resistance is fragile work. The allure of modernity's rhetoric its speed, its glamour, its promise of control can dull the moral imagination. To resist effectively requires a kind of moral patience: the courage to pause where the world demands acceleration. This patience is not inaction; it is deliberation. It allows room for memory and for moral intuition to breathe.

The task, finally, is not to escape technology's reach but to reclaim the space of decision within it. When African philosophy insists on moral agency, it is not appealing to abstract autonomy but to a deeper sense of responsibility, the awareness that every innovation reconfigures the horizon of human possibility. To act within that awareness is to resist, and in resisting, to remain human.

A Tentative Future: Human Flourishing in a Digital Age

It is difficult to speak of the future without falling into prophecy or fear. Yet African humanism invites a quieter kind of foresight, one rooted in relationship rather than prediction. The question is not what the next technology will be, but what kind of life will remain possible alongside it. Ikuenobe (2016) and Murove (2009) both argue that African communitarian ethics, when taken seriously, offers a moral compass capable of guiding societies through this uncertain terrain. Their claim is not utopian; it is pragmatic. If being human means being-with-others, then every tool we create must, in some way, sustain that witness.

Still, the scale of technological power complicates this demand. Global industries now shape habits of attention, education, and governance at speeds that exceed traditional moral processes. The challenge is not simply to regulate, but to reimagine how can communities participate in shaping their own technological conditions rather than merely adapting to them? Eboh (2019) calls this the restoration of moral purpose to reason the insistence that intellect must serve life rather than abstraction.

A genuinely human future would require new forms of ownership and responsibility. Instead of distant corporations dictating digital reality, communities might reclaim the means of connection cooperative networks, locally governed data systems, or open infrastructures designed for shared benefit. These are not mere technical arrangements; they are ethical architectures, embodiments of a different idea of progress.

Such a future would also prize diversity over uniformity. Just as ecosystems thrive through variation, so too should cultures of technology. The current drive toward universal platforms and universal codes flattens difference into convenience. An *Ubuntu*-informed approach would cultivate plurality technologies tailored to specific languages, ecologies, and moral horizons. It would see innovation not as replication but as responsiveness to local life.

There is also the question of memory. Murove (2009) reminds us that African ethics has always linked moral health to ecological continuity. In a digital age, that continuity extends beyond the environment to the inner ecology of attention and relation. The preservation of wisdom of oral tradition, of shared ritual, of embodied learning must find its way into digital expression if modernity is to remain humanly legible.

One might imagine an artificial intelligence grounded in *Ubuntu* values. It would not aim to replace judgment but to deepen it; not to predict behaviour, but to encourage dialogue. Its measure of success would not be efficiency but understanding. Such systems may sound speculative, yet the speculation itself matters. It reclaims imagination from markets and returns it to ethics.

The work of translation between principle and practice has already begun. Movements for data justice, indigenous knowledge preservation, and community-based innovation are emerging across Africa and the diaspora. Their common thread is moral agency the conviction that technology must answer to the values of those it touches. The task now is to deepen these experiments, to ensure they remain attentive to both local wisdom and global consequence.

A tentative future, then, is one that accepts vulnerability as part of wisdom. It knows that control is not the same as care, and that progress without reflection easily becomes loss. To flourish in a digital age is not to master the machine, but to learn how to remain human while living among machines.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The conversation between African humanism and technological modernity does not end with agreement. It moves, hesitantly, between gratitude for human creativity and unease at its consequences. The encounter is not only

philosophical but existential. It asks whether the speed and scope of modern innovation have outpaced the moral vocabularies that once grounded human community.

Eboh (2019) and Wiredu (1996) both remind us that philosophy's task is not to halt progress but to recall its purpose. The problem is not machinery itself; it is forgetfulness: the ease with which means begin to masquerade as ends. African humanism insists that any genuine modernity must still answer to the moral texture of life, to the fragile but enduring need for belonging.

Yet, as Oguejiofor (2010) observes, the forces arrayed against this moral reorientation are immense. Technology is no longer just a set of tools; it is the environment within which we think, work, and even dream. To insist on human values within such a system is to swim against a powerful current. Still, the insistence matters. It is an act of memory, a refusal to let the language of efficiency become the only measure of worth.

Future work must turn this reflection into practice. The ethical insights of African humanism can and should inform debates on artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and digital governance. Ikuenobe (2016) has already hinted that a communitarian approach could reshape global ethics, grounding decision-making in relational accountability rather than abstract principle. This would mean designing technologies that promote solidarity, shared stewardship, and ecological care.

Such work will require collaboration that crosses disciplines and traditions. Philosophers must learn to speak with technologists, policymakers, and local communities. Educational systems must teach not only coding and data literacy but ethical imagination, the ability to foresee the moral consequences of design. Without that imagination, innovation risks becoming a form of amnesia, erasing the very lives it promises to improve.

Perhaps the enduring contribution of African humanism is this: it keeps open the question of what it means to be human in a world that often forgets to ask. It offers a language in which moral complexity is not weakness but wisdom, and where progress is judged not by what we build, but by how we live together once it is built.

The future, if it is to remain human, will depend on that kind of memory, one that holds technology within the circle of care, relation, and shared responsibility. African philosophy, with its insistence on life as participation, offers a way to begin again: not by rejecting the modern, but by teaching it how to remember the human face within the machine.

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