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MELBOURNE

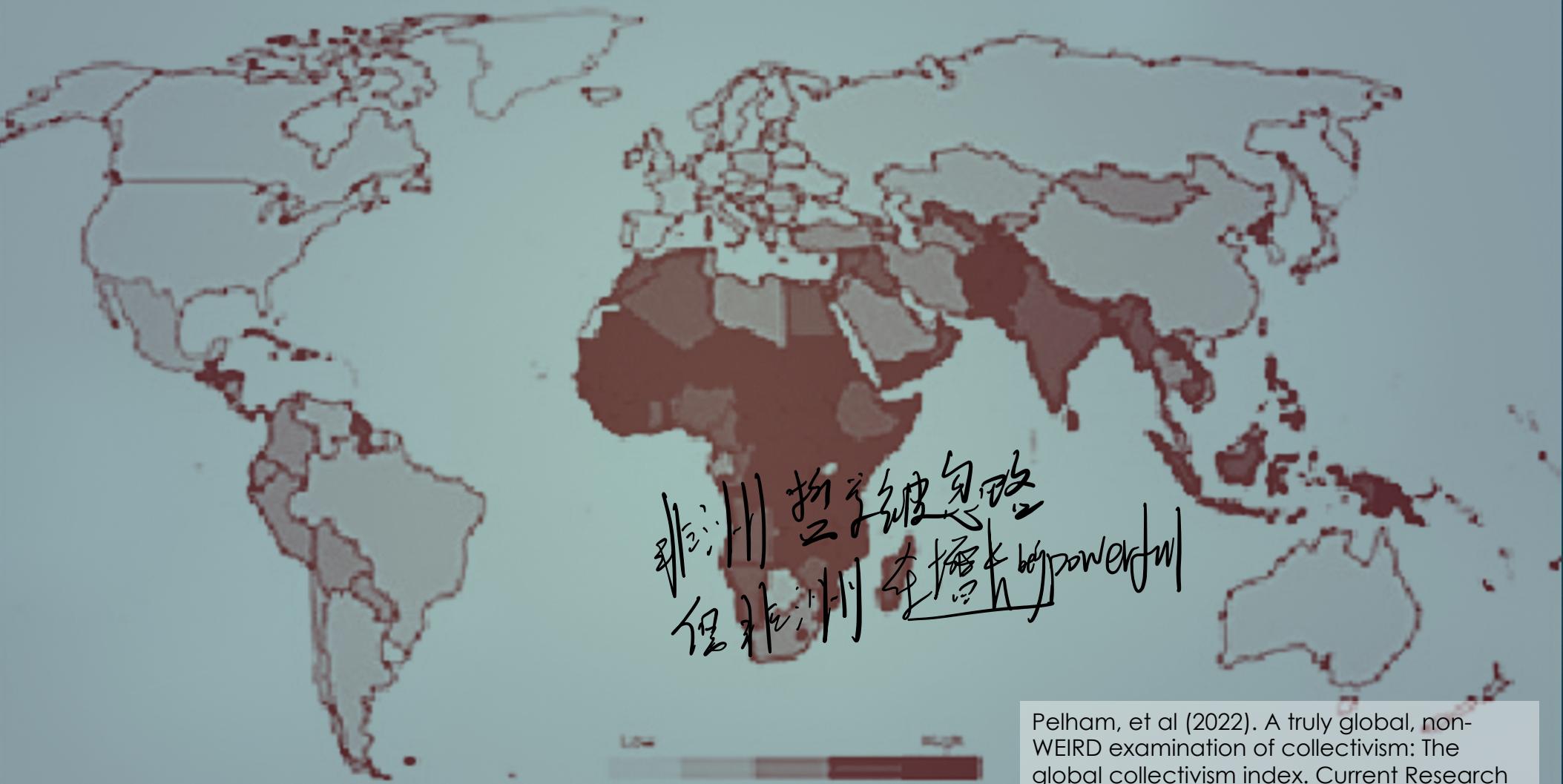
# Ubuntu philosophy and Digital Ethics

Nicola (Nic) Bidwell

*more broad  
than AI*

# Inclusion in digital ethics

- ▶ Digital ethics principles often claim universality; yet, most guidelines are developed by stakeholders in economically powerful countries with Anglo-Saxon traditions
  - ▶ Their moral theories emphasise people's individual rights and responsibilities
  - ▶ Digital governance mainly focuses on protecting autonomy within a private sphere
- ▶ African, Asian and Latin American societies have values and cultural traditions that can be characterized as less individualist



Pelham, et al (2022). A truly global, non-WEIRD examination of collectivism: The global collectivism index. Current Research in Ecological and Social Psychology, 3

70% of the world's population has  
collectivist characteristics

個々主義 individualist

- ▶ Low-income countries tend to be more collectivistic
- ▶ Individualistic societies emerge with economic growth
- ▶ Complex regional differences in collectivism, e.g., Buddhist, Catholic or Muslim religious traditions
- ▶ Individualism and collectivism are not a single set of bipolar cultural dimensions, e.g., self-interest, independence, concepts about the self in relation to others

What makes you  
human?

What does it mean to  
be person?

Rationality  
Rationality  
~~muddled~~

can be mark



‘Rational beings are called persons inasmuch as nature already marks them out as ends in themselves’ (Kant)





~~ABD~~  
AU bantu

A person exists  
because of  
other people  
depends on recognise  
and interact with others

Neither community or individual exists before the other

co-exist 共存的那个先后  
dynamic co-construction

Existing as a human always involves dynamically and mutually constituting other humans

Our humanity is inextricably bound in relations with other people

# African relational humanism

“a person is a person because of other people”

Different languages, different terms, e.g., Ubuntu, Botho  
isiXhosa: “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”

Northern Sotho, Selobedu: “Motho ke Motho ka Batho”

~~个体和整体上的也紧紧地互相依存(相互联结)。~~

“Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: ‘I am, because we are and since we are, therefore I am.’”

(Mbiti, 1970)

*I'm because we're*



## Communalist logic

African personhood is a process of becoming a person through social relations

An individual must subject themselves to their community to qualify for personhood

Communitarian social arrangements

# Communalist logic

*Different living arrangements is origin (住-處) - 起居*

Individualistic rights and claims to property are tied to communal obligations

~~share~~

Safeguarding social stability and welfare limited the individual rights and values of people who lived in collectives, e.g., extended family groups





## Individualist logic

- ★ Emphasise the agency of individual over a community ★
- Respect the decisional autonomy of an individual to make decisions without coercion

Western moral theories E.g., utilitarianism, Kantianism

# Individualist logics can assume:

Communalism is incompatible with evolving societies

Group thinking is incompatible with individual liberties

Collectivism cannot be egalitarian or ensure that all people have equal rights and opportunities



# African personhood features individual agency within communal obligation

“a relational and positive sense of autonomy, which involves the community helping or guiding one to use one’s ability and knowledge of one’s social relations and circumstance to choose freely the requisite goods for achieving one’s life plan.”  
(Ikuenobe, 2015)

Ubuntu values individual ability to mobilise communal obligation by developing social networks or “wealth in people”  
(Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001)

# Personhood through Ubuntu is inevitably shifting ...

## *relational concept*

African personhood: 你对我有意义，我对你也一样  $\Rightarrow$  我们一起努力

- ▶ Should not be considered a fixed universal concept
- ▶ Is contextual and creatively constituted

Africans welcomed Europeans into their communities from early on

‘Ubuntu’ was used to emphasise that people are interconnected in South African efforts to transition from the apartheid regime’s segregation ideology

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基于他们的能所传统和故事 → based tradition, culture

# Hip-hop artists in Makhanda, South Africa (Schoon et al, 2020)

## *low income community*

- ▶ Produce music in the backyard of low-income townships
- ▶ Differentiate themselves from white people or middle-class black people
- ▶ Combine a communal African sense of self with more “modern” identities
  - ▶ Master digital practices
  - ▶ Express the value of local culture: isiXhosa poetic expression, deep knowledge of traditional culture and strategies to survive under difficult material circumstances



→ 用不着一起 promot

# Hip-hop artists in Makhanda

- ▶ Relational sense of self-worth situated in a person's relationship with others
  - ▶ Focus on their ability to give younger people advice, according to an obligation to develop others in their community
  - ▶ Gain status by mobilizing their social network, which aligns with a person's connectedness to their community and their respect for others
- ▶ Identities based in personal brilliance, which is often denied to poor Black people





# Electronic repairers in Pabbo, Uganda (Bidwell, 2021)

- ▶ Three repair electronic hardware
  - repair shops *(three)*
- ▶ Relational sense of self-worth
  - situated in a person's relationship with others
- ▶ Share electricity, customers, tools, of knowledge and problem-solving *(competition)*
- ▶ Manage precarity through local social relations
  - Communal-link



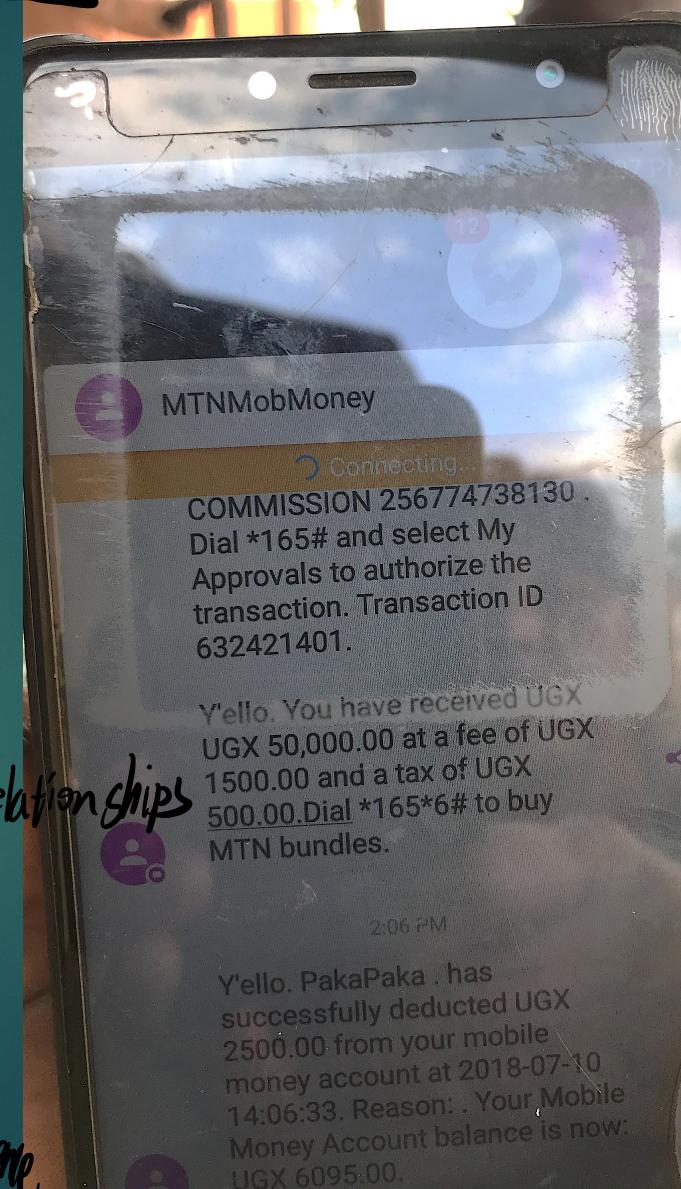
# Electronic repairers in Pabbo

- ▶ Interconnections between local, national and international systems enhance productivity and manage precarity

*you like me → we share same  
psychological shared interests, relationships*

Bidwell, N.J. (2021) Decolonising in the gaps: Community Networks and the identity of African innovation. In: *Media, Culture and Technology in the Global South: Revisiting Communication and Identity in Africa and the Caribbean*. Palgrave.

*share similar experience*





# Community in the context of Ubuntu

- ▶ Traditional community: a spatially compact set of people with a high frequency of f2f interaction and many interconnections
- ▶ Contemporary community: a set of people who meet f2f intermittently or interact entirely via phones/the internet with
- ▶ Difference between concrete and imagined sets of people
  - ▶ Psychological sense in which people identify with others and have close and sympathetic social relations they perceive to be similar
  - ▶ A shared physical and social context supports values, norms, experiences, places, identity, collective goals and community members play multiple roles by participating in different activities

# Rural community life in Mankosi, South Africa

- ▶ Ancestry and everyday life contributes shared values, norms, experiences, collective goals and people play multiple roles in the community
- ▶ Community Network
  - ▶ Network: tech infrastructure e.g., solar-powered Wi-Fi with internet connections
  - ▶ Community: people who set-up, manage, use and decide about the network
- ▶ <https://zenzeleni.net>

52 Feb 2022



# Maimaila Community Network , South Africa

(Magoro & Bidwell, 2022)

- ▶ Households collaborate in Leola to support bereaved families with funding, equipment and human resources, in funerals and burials
- ▶ Designed an app to support Leola demonstrates collective work:
  - ▶ Collect and distribute funds
  - ▶ Share elders' advice
  - ▶ Identify challenges affecting different parts of the community and coordinate to address them
  - ▶ Network and liaise with authorities
- ▶ [www.mamailanetwork.co.za/](http://www.mamailanetwork.co.za/)



# MCN Applied Matshepo's techniques

- ▶ Sought to enable Black people to liberate their minds and heal the psychological damage of colonisation and apartheid
- ▶ “Without all the holding hands together and an environment which has been created by the people themselves and the institutions to allow that to happen it [transformation] will not work”

Magoro. K.D., Bidwell N.J., (2022). Land, Letšema and Leola: Digital Transformation on a Rural Community's own Terms. In 'Innovation Practices for Digital Transformation in the Global South'. Springer.



# Ubuntu applied in different disciplines

- ▶ For over 70 years in various Western disciplines, e.g., philosophy, sociolinguistics, politics, social work etc..
- ▶ As an African solution to African problems in mathematics and technology education (e.g., Muwanga-Zake, 2009); and, in digital ethics, such as privacy (Olinger et al, 2007)
- ▶ Addressing ethics in medicine/healthcare, e.g.,
  - ▶ Moral tension between civil liberties and public health arising from the state's decision-making during pandemics
  - ▶ Orthopaedic practices enabling respectful and beneficial care for patients without reducing the common good

# Ubuntu drawn on in South Africa's COVID- 19 awareness campaigns

**My mask protects you.  
Your mask protects me.**



Even if you don't have symptoms, masks are important to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

**Please wear fabric masks in public. Always wash masks between use.**



## **Without a Mask**

- Your cough or sneeze travels farther
- More germs are released in the air and onto surfaces
- More people can get sick from your germs

## **With a Fabric Mask**

- Your cough or sneeze is more contained
- Fewer germs are released
- More people are protected from your germs

# Ubuntu in computing in southern Africa

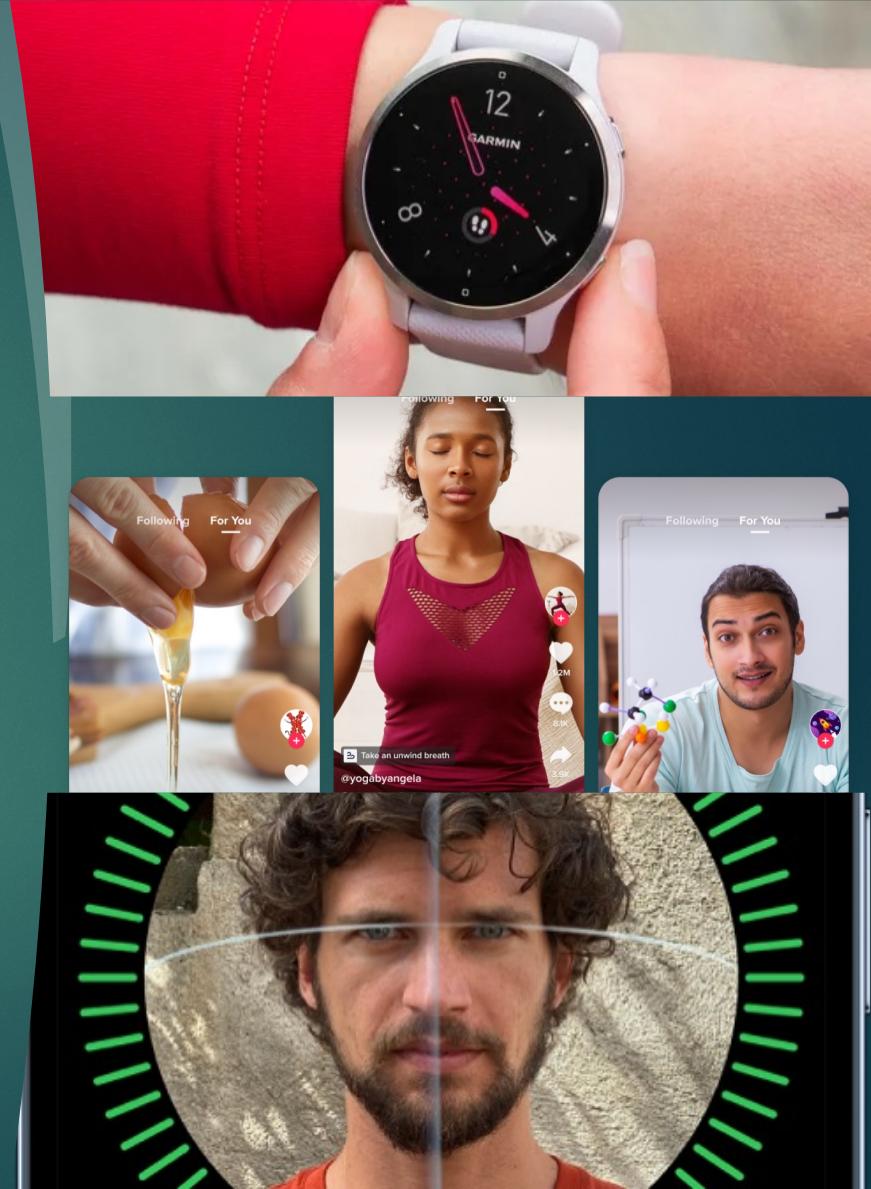


- ▶ Early 2000's first easy-to-use desktop to widen access to and usability of the Linux operating system
- ▶ IS, e.g., designing e-government technologies to complement traditions (e.g., Twinomurinzi et al, 2010)
- ▶ HCI, e.g. tensions between Ubuntu and dominant approaches to technology design (e.g., Bidwell, 2010)
- ▶ Participatory Design (PD) (Winschiers-Theophilus & Bidwell, 2013)
- ▶ Information and Communication Technology and Development (ICTD)
- ▶ Technology governance, e.g. privacy (Renauld et al, 2015)

所有東西都是圍繞著自我 . Identity

## Individualist logic is embedded in technologies

- ▶ An individualist logic that personhood exists prior to interpersonal relationships predominates
- ▶ Data relations will inherently enact or amplify existing social relations (Viljoen, 2021)
- ▶ To promote shared humanity, ethics needs to go beyond technical solutions and account for existing privilege and future empowerment



# Personhood is relational in Ubuntu

“whatever harms humanity is against Ubuntu” Mungai, 2015

Ubuntu emphasizes that humanity emerges in relations between people. Thus, when people in one social group violate the humanity of people outside of that group, they deprive their own group of humanness

To be human ourselves we must prioritise other people's dignity and well-being especially for the weakest



# ~~Algorithmic~~ and data injustices ... ~~Bias~~

# AI models reproduce and amplify historical and socioeconomic disparities:

- ▶ Implicit and explicit social stereotypes, e.g., race, gender etc..
  - ▶ Bias in the training data because advantaged groups collect data that benefits themselves



# Algorithmic and data injustices

AI models reproduce and amplify historical and socioeconomic disparities:

- ▶ Bias in the ways data is collected and the type of data collected, ignore parts of personal experience that relevant to socially disadvantaged groups
- ▶ Disconnects between the algorithm designers and the communities where data is gathered or algorithms are implemented

# Ubuntu ethics frameworks promote shared humanity

Ethics frameworks for AI systems (Gwagwa et al, 2022; Birhane, 2021; Mhalmbi, 2020), should:

- ▶ Undo previous and current societal inequalities
- ▶ Elevate those who are disadvantaged
- ▶ Assist in implementing values that promote values of relational humanism

# Values of African relational humanism

- ▶ The common good
- ▶ ~~The common humanity of humans despite their diversity~~
- ▶ ~~Prioritizing the dignity of others, particularly the most vulnerable~~
- ▶ Communal relations: generosity, hospitality, compassion, friendliness and sympathy for others
- ▶ Harmony and peaceful relations
- ▶ Tolerance and mutual respect of humans despite their diversity
- ▶ Solidarity, reciprocity and cooperative participation
- ▶ Resolving difficult moral decisions through *consensus*
  - ↳ *idea that comes to compromise*
  - ↳ *majority decision*

# *Integrity*

## The dignity of all, particularly the most vulnerable

- ▶ Collect diverse data from different regions, races, ethnicities, tribes, geographies and socioeconomic groups
- ▶ Use data in ways that are sensitive to diverse needs and experiences
- ▶ Consider Ubuntu in managing conflicting cultural values (Gwagwa et al, 2022)

# Community good – common good

- ▶ Emphasise communal aspects of life in understanding existential situations
- ▶ Do not undermine communal relationships or social cohesion
- ▶ Consider the well-being of the community over the individual
  - ▶ People who identify with a communal relation know that others will act in their own best interest via the interest of their community (Ewuoso, 2021)

# Trust

- ▶ Ubuntu embeds a moral sense of social trust; that is, confidence in another person's actions through long-term, honest, kind and respectful relationships
- ▶ Achieving this with AI requires:
  - ▶ Long-term collaboration, involving communities and experts in designing, developing and overseeing AI systems to gain sufficient understanding to be able to judge them
  - ▶ Transparent communication about the capabilities and limitations of AI tools e.g., reporting cases where an algorithm fails
  - ▶ Monitoring, reporting on and addressing negative consequences

# Managing conflicting values example: Informed consent

- ▶ Focuses on a person's free and voluntary decision, based on sufficient knowledge and without coercion
- ▶ Often based on a Kantian concept of personhood, which assumes a person's capacity for autonomous rational decision-making
- ▶ Presents a problem given AI's opacity problem (e.g., LLMs that scrape public data from the internet, complex algorithms etc..)

# Managing conflicting values example: Informed consent

- ▶ Ubuntu concept of personhood respects a person's inherent dignity regardless of judgements about their rationality and relates to community
- ▶ Acquire informed consent in communal relationships
  - ▶ If a person has genuine solidarity with a community, they will be transparent in their interactions and willingly protect the combined and common interests of community members

# Questions

