

# Public lecture by Prof. Mogobe Ramose

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# Contesting justice with robots



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## Contesting justice with robots

Mogobe Ramose

### Salutation

*Thobela, sanibonani, ten'esteleng, goede morgen, good morning to you all.*

Permit me the request that we please observe a minute's silence in memory of two distinguished philosophers-theologians who died in close succession to each other.

- Professor Enrique Domingo Dussel Ambrosini, died on 5 November 2023 at the age of 89.
- Reverend Father Professor Benezet Bujo, died on 9 November 2023 at the age of 83.

Thank you. I convey my gratitude to everyone involved in the decision to grant me the privilege to deliver the lecture today, on the subject: **Contesting justice with robots**. I prefer to describe what follows as a *dialogue* rather than a lecture.

My thanks go also to all those who organized this event until this moment. I am most grateful to you all present in person and virtually for having decided to be with us on this occasion. I trust that we will have a mutually edifying dialogue.

### Introduction

I have requested that the song of Miriam Makeba, **La shon'ilanga** be played as the entry point to our dialogue. It is a song about love. Here it is love of one's neighbour as oneself is not our point of focus despite its relevance. I have in mind love of that which we seem to love best, namely, the love of being-a-human-being-in-the-world. Simply put, the love of the fact that we are human beings. Makeba's song is a reverie about an absent beloved. Sunset has plunged her into this reverie wishing and longing for the actual presence of the beloved. It is nostalgia desiring the return of the beloved because she or he may not be lost. It is precisely this apparently ineradicable love of being-human-in-the-world which we seem to be eager to protect and retain in the face of the apparent threat from science and technology delivering the age of transhumanity. This is the age of the automation, computerization and cybernetization, of human functions – *without the benefit of consciousness* – through technology “approaching the complexity and sophistication of biological systems”.<sup>1</sup> Our topic, contesting justice with robots is lodged in this context.

Permit me to turn to William Wordsworth's poem, *The Daffodils*.

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils,  
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

It was Wordsworth who defined poetry as “the recollection of emotion in tranquillity”. Indeed, the rhythm of the stanza, its cadences and contemplative observation of nature all speak to this definition.

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<sup>1</sup> Scortia, T. N and Zebrowski, G., (ed.) 1975. Human-machines An anthology on stories about cyborgs, New York, Vintage Books, p.xxiii

It was a time of patient observation and appreciation of nature without haste and fleeting indifference. It was a time when even flowers could detain not only the bees but also the attention of human beings sensitive to their proximity with nature. Indeed, the same spectacle of flowers could evoke a different perspective on penetrating thoughts about life and its meaning. Here we turn to Wordsworth's poem, *To Daffodils*.

Fair Daffodils, we weep to see  
You haste away so soon;  
As yet the early-rising sun  
Has not attained its noon.  
Stay, stay,  
Until the hasting day  
Has run  
But to the even-song;  
And, having prayed together, we  
Will go with you along.

We die  
As your hours do, and dry  
Away,  
Like to the summer's rain;  
Or as the pearls of morning's dew  
Ne'er to be found again.

The contemplative steadiness of these stanzas stands in sharp contrast to the hasty language of bytes; bites from sharp teeth that do violence to language, suppress curiosity and plant the seed of obedience to the dictates of the strictly timed "prompts" of the machine. Yet, it would appear that the pleasure of love bites is much better than the aggressive language of bytes. Information technology today is an extrapolation from the military command technology to civilian communication technology demanding implementation with the least time to think through the "prompt". It places the highest premium on instant obedience to the command of the "prompts". Imagination and contemplation are stifled. A cautious and critical approach to life is often deemed inefficient and a waste of time. And so, a culture of pliant submissiveness to authority is reinforced surreptitiously. By this route we are close to confirming T S Eliot's "the hollow men" in his famous poem, *The wreck of the Deutschland*. *Festina lente*, hasten slowly is one of the famous aphorisms of West European Middle Ages. Contrary to best health care practice, today we are commanded by technological rationality to **hasten quickly with utmost celerity**.

One of the consequences of this contemporary human condition is that utility is priced higher than the dignity of the human being. We are defined as *human capital* and *human resources* today. We are

placed on the same plane with things as an expansion of the Western “law of things”. But we are warned sternly that:

When people determine to care for nothing but what is directly and obviously useful, the days of their own usefulness are already numbered.<sup>2</sup>

In view of this, I cannot but recall Thomas Gray’s poem, *Elegy written in a country churchyard*. Permit me to cite only two stanzas just to underline the price we continue to pay for our tacit acceptance of utility over human dignity.

But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page  
Rich with the spoils of time did ne’er unroll;  
Chill Penury repressed their noble rage,  
And froze the genial current of the soul.

Full many a gem of purest ray serene  
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear;  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

I can hear some of you murmuring quietly but with irritation. When will he get to the point? Why all this deviation to poetry? Indeed, these are normal questions. But in our time they are induced and intensified by the violence of the language of bytes. And I call attention to this precisely by taking you to poetry. In this way, I extend an invitation to you to consider alternatives to a hasty randomized life suffused with noisy eruptions undermining the tranquil quest for a meaningful purposefulness in life.

### **Africa is the Mother of technology**

In some of my already published works, I have expressed my concurrence with African scholars such as Ali Mazrui, that the name Africa is ethically and scientifically contentious.<sup>3</sup> In line with this argument, I do use the name Africa here but under protest.

Africa is not a newcomer to technology. This is because once upon a time Mother Earth was just one compact sphere. According to the inscription in one of the plaques in the National Museum of Ethiopia in Addis Ababa, “the first tool makers” emerged out of Africa during the Acheulean period.<sup>4</sup> This was

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<sup>2</sup> SARTON, G., Introduction to the history of science, Volume 1, From Homer to Omar Khayyam, The Williams and Wilkins Company, Baltimore, 1927. (Reprinted 1945, 1950. Published for the Carnegie Institution of Washington), p. 10

<sup>3</sup> Ramose, M., I doubt, therefore African philosophy exists, South African Journal of Philosophy, Volume 22 Number 2, 2003, p. 113-127

<sup>4</sup> Many English dictionaries offer this meaning of **Acheulean**: *of or relating to a Lower Paleolithic culture originating in Africa and typified by bifacial tools with round cutting edges. Acheulean also spelled Acheulian, first standardized tradition of toolmaking of Homo erectus and early Homo sapiens.*

the period before Mother Earth was split into different pieces of a perfectly fitting jigsaw puzzle. Those human beings carried away out of Africa at the split of Mother Earth were destined to continue toolmaking or technology in the geographic region in which they found themselves. It is therefore historically myopic and scientifically questionable to suggest that technology began in the West after the emergence of “science”. This suggestion sustains the indulgence of “science” in consigning to hypnotic mesmerism an answer to the question: what was the kind and level of technology used to build the pyramids of Egypt and to erect the great Zimbabwe ruins? To stand up in contempt and disregard of “our story” is to praise his-story wounded fatally by its defective objectivity.

The splitting of Mother Earth into different pieces of a jigsaw puzzle may well be construed as a symbol of the future reality of “fragmentation in science and society”.<sup>5</sup> Africa remained and continues to be the guardian and preserver of the oneness and wholeness of be-ing through *ubu-ntu*. Yet, she continues to be treated with condescending indifference – except for her wealth – especially by the West together with the supposedly “three great religions of the world”.

It is in the same National Museum of Ethiopia that we read yet another inscription, namely, “and the world became African”. *Homo sapiens sapiens* knows Africa as its first home; its cradle. If it is true that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” why is it that it is dubious for some that Mother Africa is the cradle of humanity? His-story is replete with examples showing that “science” was sometimes ready to reject its own reason for existence, namely, the quest for truth only. There is no reason to conclude that “science” has renounced permanently its deviation from the path of truth. The first toolmakers, the technologists, were born in Africa.

#### **Underlying philosophical questions and theses concerning the subject on hand**

1. **What does it mean to be a human being?** This question precludes and refutes skin colour-based reasoning connected to human relations. There are many people who are very conscious about their skin. Few among them care to give a correct description of their skin colour. Some describe themselves as white. But those with deep knowledge of colours know that whites are bearers of an anonymous skin colour appearing with different shades of pink and yellow. The wish to maintain false ontological superiority over the rest of humanity turned to the symbolic meaning of whiteness as purity. This continued to be contrasted with blackness deemed to be impurity.

Such reasoning – though intensely active and even deadly in our time – is irrelevant to the philosophical question posed here. Skin colour-based or pigmentation-oriented reasoning is a sterile fossil defeated by the scientific affirmation that at the DNA level human beings are 99.9% identical. The inescapable inference from this is that we human belong to only one family. Black and white skin-colouredness is the social terrain of contestation over the exercise of the right to life in terms of access and use of the resources necessary for the preservation of human life as well as life as a wholeness.

2. **Are robots on an identical ontological plane as human beings?** This question is the foundation upon which the question of justice arises in the relationship between human beings and robots. The question revolves around the thesis that *a robot is not a human being*. For reasons of conceptual clarity and precision this whole-istic question is split into two fragments, namely, (i) **epistemic** and, (ii) **social** justice.
3. “The cyborg theme is quite closely related to those of robots and artificial beings”. (Scortia and Zebrowski, op. cit., p. xxii) According to Scortia and Zebrowski,

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<sup>5</sup> Bohm, D., Fragmentation in science and society, Impact of Science on Society, Vol. XX, No. 2, 1970

Cyborg, a portmanteau word compounded of cybernetic and organism, was coined in 1960 by Manfred Clynes who, with Nathan S. Kline, wrote: 'self-regulating man-machine systems ... need (s) to function without the benefit of consciousness in order to cooperate with the body's own autonomous homeostatic controls. For the artificially extended homeostatic control system, functioning unconsciously, ...[Manfred Clynes] has coined the term Cyborg. (op. cit., p. xiv)

Brown, G., *Minds Brains and Machines* and Churchland, T., *Matter and consciousness*. The book of Scortia and Zebrowski was published in 1975. It seems reasonable to assume that five years down the line, Mercier was probably aware this book or some other literature pertaining to the cyborg project when he warned that:

But here, what is thrown to the flames is the soul. Life is then still possible, but the question arises, whether we can be totally happy about it, especially when we note the happiness which is with those who have not been thus robbed of their soul. We must in particular realize that if all men were deprived of such and such of their main organs as if it were of no use, the time would soon come when mankind would be reduced to some kind of nothingness. This I utter as a serious warning for a future which may be pretty near, in case society should become a collection of soul-less beings.<sup>6</sup>

Mercier's warning is the living reality of our time. His concern with the "soul" is understandable but problematical from a variety of points of view. The problem is that the "soul" is vague and ambiguous. It is the former because it is generally understood as immaterial, invisible and eternal. If it is immaterial and invisible, how is knowledge of it acquired? If it is immaterial and invisible, is it one of the inhabitants of Plato's world of the Ideas or Forms having the attribute of eternity? The ambiguity arises from this because it opens the door to the question: which "soul" is eternal the "universal" or the "individual"? If it's the latter, then it has a beginning if it is a gift of "God". That which has a beginning must have an end. The "individual soul" cannot, therefore, be eternal and immortal. Even if one were to concede the belief that "God" creates the human being out of nothing – *ex nihilo* – and then infuses a "soul" in it this would be reaffirmation of the thesis that that which has a beginning must have an end. If there is only one "universal soul" with ramous habitations in a multiplicity of human bodies then only the body is the inevitable victim of finite temporality and mortality.

The above considerations suggest that it is best to discard thinking in terms of the concept of "the soul". To do so is to remain trapped in Descartes dualism subsisting without a solution to date. The considerations also bring to mind Kwasi Wiredu's plausible argument in his article, *Decolonising African religions*, that the idea of "creation out of nothing" is repugnant to African philosophical thought. I therefore propose to modify and replace "a collection of soul-less beings" with **a collection of beings without consciousness and devoid of human intelligence**". Following from this, I pose the question: *if it is acceptable that "God" created the human being out of nothing but in His "own image and likeness" why is it repugnant that humanity can produce from the materials available to it a human being almost in its own image and likeness?*

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<sup>6</sup> Mrecier, A., *Conclusions*, in *Proceedings of the Third International Philosophy Conference 15-18 December 1980, Cairo, Egypt*. Wahba, M., (ed.) 1983. *Unity of Knowledge*, Cairo, Ain Shams Univ. Press, p. 212-213

4. **Can robots know and understand the phenomena in nature in the same way and to the same extent as human beings do?**
5. **Is it actually true that robots know and understand the phenomena in nature in an identical manner and to the same extent as human beings do?**
6. **Science and technology are imitations of nature.** The bird has challenged humanity to invent the aeroplane and deadly nuclear weapon missiles. The fish has prompted humanity to invent the ship and submarines carrying deadly nuclear weapon missiles. Observations of animal life led to the manufacture of Dolly the Sheep. Multiple and varied questions and contentions arose since the appearance of Dolly the Sheep. They are still with us today though in different circumstances and contemporary vocabulary. Underlying these questions and contentions is the recognition that science and technology have placed humanity on the trajectory of the transhuman. *Does this mean that the meaning of being-a-human-being-in-the-world must or ought to change? Does it mean that through science and technology, humanity is on the threshold of producing a being greater than itself? Is it so that "God" – in whatever way this concept is understood – can produce a being greater than Itself [Himself]?* The thesis of Scortia and Zebrowski is pertinent to the second and third questions. It is that:

Paralleling the development of man-machine symbiotes will be the extension of present computer technology to develop machines capable of inductive reasoning and, more importantly, possessing feedback systems of sufficient subtlety that self-repair and ego-awareness are possible. ... Self-modification and a new form of evolution might be possible, leading to dramatic changes in the nature of the human race. (op. cit., p. xix)

It would appear that this has come to pass with the entry into the scene of Artificial Intelligence.

7. **But why Artificial Intelligence and not Scientific Intelligence? Does art have the same meaning as science?** Is this naming a concession that without imagination science cannot advance? To this day, some universities maintain a strict separation between art and science maintaining that the former is the domain largely of the free exercise of imagination whereas the latter upholds the empirically verified as knowledge proper. Why then collapse the distinction to allow talk, for example, of Artificial Insemination and, Artificial Intelligence? Indeed, Kusum's book, *Artificial insemination and the law*, was published in 1977.
8. **What is intelligence?** According to Hoyle, a scientist:

In effect, talk of a primitive aggregate collecting up potential enzymes really implies the operation of an intelligence, an intelligence which by distinguishing potential enzymes possesses power of judgment.

But do we know that there was a "who" or a "what", a controlling intelligence? Of course, we have no such certain knowledge, otherwise we would all have grown up with a keen awareness of it. But interestingly we have here a clue at least which provides an affirmative answer to the question. The seemingly insuperable difficulties of deep-space travel suggest an intention to keep us fixed at home in our own solar system, and the physical nature of our part of the Universe, as well as the basic rules of physics and chemistry, have a warning look about them, like barriers designed to isolate intelligent life. This means that for us, unlike the situation for humble microorganisms, deep-space travel is probably a stark impossibility.

This sets the scene for the origin of life on the largest conceivable stage. The stage is not local, not restricted to our solar system nor even to our own galaxy, but truly cosmic. If an intelligence was

involved in the origin of life, the intelligence was very big indeed, as I suspect is recognized by the religious instinct residing in all of us, the instinct that whispers in some remote region of our consciousness. Life is therefore a cosmological phenomenon, perhaps the most fundamental aspect of the Universe itself.<sup>7</sup>

One may infer from the above citations that “intelligence” may be construed as a higher power having the capacity to gather resources practically and combine or mix them coherently in pursuit of a specific outcome. This is the vertical understanding of “intelligence”. The horizontal understanding of “intelligence” is that it is the disposition to gather and organise resources coherently and systematically to arrive at a specific outcome which may at times turn out to be a surprise, that is, an unintended result.

There is yet another understanding of “intelligence” at the horizontal level, namely, espionage. Robots in the guise of scientific rather than “artificial intelligence” are designed as extensions of human intelligence in the two horizontal senses just mentioned. As human inventions, robots have neither ethics nor a moral theory. *The manner and extent to which human beings use robots gives rise to moral questions.*

**Under the tight grip of the *pecunimania* pandemic, scientific intelligence or robots in our time are subjected to the ideal of “*profit über alles*”.**<sup>8</sup> *Pecunimania* thrives best when

The social system that predominates in our countries is profoundly inequitable, giving rise to institutionalized injustice and social sin, ... [having] a collective selfishness embodied in an elitist, exclusivist social system that has no solidarity with the great multitudes of the poor. ... [It] has a name ... the Capitalism of private property and the Capitalism of the state.<sup>9</sup>

Because of this, robots are thrown into contesting justice with human beings. In his book, *Philosophy and an African culture*, Kwasi Wiredu argues against this. He submits that it would not profit Africa to gain all sophisticated technology but lose its “humanist principles”. For Wiredu technology ought always to be infused and diffused with “humanist principles” for the preservation of humane relations among human beings. He invokes the Akan ethical maxim, *obra ye nnoboa*, life is mutual aid as a fundamental anchorage of a morally responsive technological trajectory. Ogotemmeli captures this perspective well:

The altar gives something to a man, and a part of what he received he passes on to others ... A small part of the sacrifice is for oneself, but the rest is for others. The forces released enter into the man, pass through him and out again, and so it is for all ... As each man gives to all the rest, so he also receives from all. A perpetual exchange goes on between men, an unceasing movement of invisible currents. And this must be so if the universal order is to endure ... for it is good to give and to receive the forces of life.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Hoyle, F., *The intelligent universe*, Michael Joseph Limited, London 1983, p. 19-20, 155-156 and 161

<sup>8</sup> Chomsky, N and Waterstone, M., 2021. *Consequences of capitalism*, Great Britain, Hamish Hamilton, 339

<sup>9</sup> Boff, L., *The Lord's Prayer The prayer of integral liberation*, 1983. (trans.) Theodore Morrow, Melbourne, Australia, Dove Communications, p. 99 and 119

<sup>10</sup> Griaule, M., 1965. *Conversations with Ogotemmeli*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 137



Bujo treads along the same path with his argument that the basic point of departure for African ethics is: “promote life, avoid killing”. This is the ubu-ntu way of saying *feta kgomo o tshware motho* – if and when one is faced with the choice to continue accumulating wealth or preserving human life then one ought to opt for the latter; the preservation of human life because in ubu-ntu philosophy *lebitla la tlala ga le tsebjwe* – except for natural disasters such as volcanoes or prolonged drought, a grave of anyone who died of hunger is unknown. Just as robots are ethically neutral human inventions, so is money. And so, it is pertinent to recall Heidegger’s famous thesis that “technology cannot think”.<sup>11</sup>

To subject the use of money to the philosophy of “*profit über alles*” is to reject the philosophy of the Birr, righteousness, in the use of money. In this way, the Ethiopian Birr stands in fundamental opposition to the Dollar of the United States of America though it is at present dominated by it.

**END**

Zahara song, **Mali, mali**

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<sup>11</sup> Botha, Catherine F., Heidegger, technology and ecology, South African Journal of Philosophy, Volume 22 Number 2, 2003, p. 157-172 provides an insightful and penetrating exposition of this thesis. On the other hand, du Toit, C., Technology with a human face, South African Journal of Philosophy, Volume 22 Number 2, 2003, p. 173-183 provides a highly contentious exposition of the African philosophical critique of technological rationality.