Negotiating Limits to *Ubuntu* in the Relationship between Dwellers and Members

To say that a human being is a human being through other human beings does not necessarily claim anything about the inclusionary or exclusionary nature of *ubuntu*. Who are those human beings through whom I am a human being? Are they the members of my church? Are they the members of my ethnic group or the citizens of my home country? Are they the whole of humankind? As empirical analysis in the previous chapters has shown, the *ubuntu* ideal of “persons in community”\(^1\) or being-with-others\(^2\) barely actualized in the relationship between members and dwellers. The ideal might have flourished in other relationships in which members and dwellers participated, but the interest in this study lies with the encounter between these two groups. If what Munyaka and Motlhabi argue about “a person’s humanity” being “discovered and recognised through good relations and interactions with others”,\(^3\) is true, the dwellers and members’ humanity only seldom seemed to be discovered in their relationship.

In this chapter, which is the joint conclusion of the chapters in Part III, I take a step back and look at the socio-moral patterns related to being human(e) that emerge in my ethnographic analysis of the dynamics at the CMM; similar meanings attached to humanity in Verryn’s vision were discussed in Part II. I do not intend to speak for everyone at the CMM; the patterns explicated below would surely not be endorsed by every member and dweller. Yet they are patterns that are reflected in my data and undoubtedly seemed to delineate the nature of the relationship between the groups. These patterns include, firstly, virtues that characterise a good relationship; secondly, structural elements that enabled or limited the actualization of the virtues; thirdly, rules that regulated the practicing of the virtues; and lastly, social identities that were used as tools to exclude and include others in the virtuous community.

In other words, I attempt to answer Mkhize’s call:

*Ubuntu* requires that ethics [a Rawlsian ethics] be reconceptualised. An African approach to ethics is not concerned with principles that

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1 Nicolson 2008.
3 Munyaka and Motlhabi 2009, 74.
have been abstracted from their social context. Rather it is concerned with the phenomenological or lived experiences of the people in question.4

However, unlike Mkhize, the aim here is to participate in de/reconceptualising (and/or confirming), not some representative of the vast pool of Western academic ethics, but the discourse on the ethics actually attached to ubuntu itself on the basis of the lived experience of a particular group of people. Eze suggests that virtues attached to ubuntu, or more specifically their application, are to be reflected upon as internal to “practices of [...] communities”, as they may “mean different things to different historical cultures, context [sic] and communities”. Even if the core concept was the same/similar in different Bantu languages, the “rules guiding social intercourse” and the application of the concept depend on the social setting and may be different, for instance, among the Shona and the Zulu.5 In the context of this study, the social setting is not defined by one ethnicity but rather the encounter of several ethnic groups. Hence, the patterns of practice and the rules guiding it that emerge in analysis reflect a context defined by migration – and ministry. So, listening to the voices at the CMM, I set out to understand ubuntu “as an emergent tradition within a particular historical context” and, more specifically, an evolving (even if not new) ethic in this context.6

I begin this chapter by scrutinizing four interrelated virtues – recognition, respect, care and help – that were reflected in the interviewees’ thinking of the ideal way of relating to other human beings. One could say that these virtues mark the direction of morality: towards other people. The list of virtues is not to be understood as exhaustive, and at times they might require or entail the acknowledgment of other related virtues, such as compassion, solidarity or kindness. The manifestation or lack of these virtues were described in ways that exposed an expected link between the character of the person (or group) and their behaviour. The expectation of this link explains people’s uneasiness with the situation in which the virtues hardly flourished. However, the lack could be explained by contextual matters that took (some) pressure off one’s own or other people’s character.

Therefore, I then turn to examine how the lack of the actualization of these virtues in the relationship can be understood. I sketch limiting rules and limiting structural elements that influenced the relationship between the groups.

4 Mkhize 2008, 42.
5 Eze 2010, 184–185.
6 Eze 2010, 186.