From Throwaway Culture to a Culture of Belongingness: An African Ethical Response to Human Vulnerability and Dignity

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Abstract
Contemporary societies increasingly transform human vulnerability into exclusion, neglect, invisibility, and disposability. Women, migrants, displaced persons, children, older people, abuse survivors, and digitally vulnerable persons can become casualties of a social order that measures human worth by productivity, utility, status, visibility, or conformity. This throwaway culture is not merely a social problem but an ethical crisis arising from the denial of human relationality and belonging. Drawing on African ethical thought and the author's philosophical thesis of *Being as Belongingness*, this paper advances a fundamental African ethical principle: no person is disposable because every person belongs, and whatever threatens the dignity of one threatens the moral integrity of the community. Grounded in relational personhood, communal solidarity, reciprocity, mutual care, and shared responsibility, this principle understands vulnerable persons not as burdens or social residues but as integral members of the moral community. Belongingness, therefore, demands recognition, protection, care, inclusion, and restoration of those pushed to the margins. Through critical analysis, the paper develops the movement from vulnerability to exclusion, throwaway culture, loss of dignity, belongingness and ethical restoration. It argues that the Igbo bioethical maxim, *mkpomkpo ndụ ka mkpomkpo ọnwụ mma* (a scrap of life is better than a scrap of death), provides a philosophical counterforce to disposability by transforming communal relationship into ethical responsibility. Thus, the dignity accorded to vulnerable persons becomes a measure of society's moral health, while belongingness becomes an Afromodalistic and ethical pathway toward inclusion, solidarity, integral wellbeing and human flourishing.

Keywords
African ethics; human dignity; belongingness; throwaway culture; vulnerability; relationality; communal solidarity; ethical responsibility

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on vulnerability, social exclusion, throwaway culture, African personhood, communitarianism, and relational ethics has generated important insights, but these perspectives have rarely been integrated. Francis (2013) and Clark and Alford (2019) analyse exclusion and disposability in contemporary society, while Mbiti (1969), Menkiti (1984), Gyekye (1997), and Metz (2007, 2022) provide significant accounts of African personhood, communal responsibility, solidarity, and relational morality. Yet, the relationship between **throwaway culture and belongingness** remains insufficiently theorised. This gap is particularly evident in relation to Onebunne's (2019) formulation of **belongingness as a definitive principle of African communalism** and Onebunne and Onwuatuegwu's (2020) articulation of belongingness within the African metaphysics of ***to be***. Although these works establish a strong ontological foundation, the ethical consequences of **Being as Belongingness** for vulnerability, exclusion, abandonment, and human disposability require further development. The present study addresses this gap by arguing that if being is fundamentally belonging, then exclusion constitutes an ontological and ethical rupture, while disposability contradicts the very conditions of communal existence. The

Igbo maxim ***mkpomkpo ndu ka mkpomkpo onwu mma*** further reinforces an affirmation of life against abandonment and social death. The study therefore develops three interconnected claims. Conceptually, throwaway culture is interpreted through belongingness; **relationally**, exclusion is understood as a rupture of communal belonging; and **normatively**, belongingness grounds the principle that **no person is disposable because every person belongs**.

The study further employs **Afromodalism** as an integrative framework for interpreting African relational existence. Afromodalism is the overarching philosophical framework; **Afromodality** is the mode or pattern through which its principles are expressed; and **Afromodals** are their concrete manifestations. Belongingness provides the connecting strand among these dimensions, linking African metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and praxis. Onebunne (2025) presents the Afromodal as a neologism describing the African communal and metaphysical modality of ***to be***, namely, being-in-belongingness. Expressions such as ***Igwebuike, Ubuntu, Egbebereugobere, Onyeaghananwanneya, Birikambiri, Kwetuism, Njikoka, Consciencism,*** and ***Ibuanyidanda*** illustrate diverse Afromodal expressions of connectedness. Thus, Afromodalism enables this study to move from a description of African communality toward an **ethical philosophy of non-disposability**, in which belongingness becomes the basis for resisting exclusion, restoring relationships, affirming human dignity, and advancing human flourishing.

Introduction

Contemporary human existence is marked by profound vulnerability. Individuals and communities experience poverty, displacement, migration, ageing, childhood dependence, abuse, disability, social marginalisation, and new forms of digital vulnerability. Yet vulnerability becomes ethically troubling when it is interpreted as weakness, uselessness, inconvenience, or failure to conform to dominant expectations. In such circumstances, persons can move from being vulnerable to being excluded, from exclusion to disposability, and ultimately from disposability to social invisibility. The emergence of what Pope Francis (2013) calls a "throwaway culture" therefore represents more than an economic or social disorder; it reveals a crisis in the way contemporary societies understand human worth. When persons are valued according to productivity, utility, consumption, status, or visibility, those who cannot satisfy these criteria become increasingly susceptible to abandonment. Against this logic, African philosophy provides a relational understanding of the human person that offers a significant ethical alternative. Mbiti's (1969) well-known formulation, "I am because we are," expresses an understanding of human existence in which the individual is inseparable from communal relationships. Menkiti (1984) similarly emphasises the constitutive importance of community in African conceptions of personhood, while Gyekye (1997) develops a moderate communitarian position that recognises both individuality and communal responsibility. African relational thought consequently provides a basis for challenging any conception of human beings as isolated, self-sufficient, or valuable only according to their functional usefulness.

It is within this philosophical context that **Being as Belongingness** becomes central. Onebunne (2019) develops belongingness as a definitive principle of African communalism, while Onebunne and Onwuatuegwu (2020) further relate belongingness to the African metaphysical understanding of ***to be***. The present study draws on this philosophical insight to advance the claim that **no person is disposable because every person belongs**. Belongingness is therefore not merely social inclusion or emotional attachment; it is an ontological and ethical condition that establishes responsibility toward the other. If being is constituted through belonging, then exclusion constitutes a rupture of relational existence, while disposability represents an intensified denial of that belonging. The paper therefore follows a deliberate philosophical movement. **First**, it examines how human vulnerability can become exclusion, demonstrating

that vulnerability itself does not diminish human dignity. **Second**, it traces the movement from exclusion to disposability, examining the ethical logic of throwaway culture and its reduction of persons to utility. **Third**, it turns from disposability to **Being as Belongingness**, establishing belongingness as the philosophical ground for an ethics of non-disposability. **Fourth**, it develops the Igbo ethical maxim *mkpomkpo ndụ ka mkpomkpo ọnwụ mma* as an African principle affirming life against abandonment and social death. **Finally**, it moves from this ethical principle toward restoration and human flourishing.

The central argument is that an authentic African ethical response to vulnerability cannot stop at sympathy or inclusion. It must restore the relational bonds through which persons recognise, protect, care for, and assume responsibility for one another. Metz (2007, 2022) similarly places harmonious relationship, solidarity, and relationality at the centre of African moral thought. Thus, the dignity of vulnerable persons becomes a test of the moral integrity of the community. A **culture of belongingness** is consequently proposed as the ethical counterforce to throwaway culture: a culture in which vulnerability evokes solidarity, exclusion demands restoration, and every human life is recognised as an irreplaceable participant in the **shared community of life**.

Appreciation of African Ethics

African ethics is a major branch of African philosophy. Philosophy, etymologically derived from the Greek words *philos* (love) and *sophia* (wisdom), means "love of wisdom." To this point, philosophy remains a human science that seeks wisdom and is a personal enterprise grounded in unaided reason. It is a human enterprise. With its major and minor branches, philosophy studies every aspect of human endeavour through unaided reasoning. It is worthy of note that no discipline, culture, science, art, form of the humanities, or aspect of society is devoid of philosophical influence. Taking cognizance of its main branches and other applied areas, Philosophy cuts across every learning and teaching to be known as *mater scientia,* mother of sciences or Knowing. Ethics or moral philosophy, as a major branch of philosophy, is a practical philosophy concerned with human good, as it evaluates, directs, and regulates human actions and activities. in line with African philosophical traditions and African ethics. According to Iroegbu (1994), ethics is "the horizontal aspect of metaphysics and the consequences of epistemology." Ethics in African philosophy has been argued to be independent of religion."

Ethics in African philosophy is both independent of religion and related to religion. It is like questioning the place of religious instruction in moral education or the place of moral education in religious instruction. Though religious instruction and moral education complement each other, they are two separate concepts. According to Onebunne, J., and Alike, M. (2017) reiterate that "religion and morality are not synonymous… Many religions have value framework…morality does not necessarily depend upon religion."" In our context as such, while God may not directly determine all moral norms, the fear of God makes the realization of those norms effective. Often a God-fearing person is a morally upright person and one who does not fear God is equally morally abominable. Morality deals with values. The effect of colonialism on the African continent is pertinent because it divided Africa into many countries and languages, robbing them of their natural disposition toward reality, with borrowed values and conceptions of good and evil. Added to these, we are in a global and information technology age which have left the world increasingly porous and vulnerable to the challenges of the time. Many things today confront our world amidst great challenges of science and technology. As modern technology inspires hope for a better future, it challenges contemporary values to the core. Hyper-technologies and genetic engineering raise questions about many violations of human values and human rights. With regard to these hyper-technologies and their toying with human life St. Pope John Paul II declared that humanity is now in a tunnel of madness. However, with regard to the positive aspects of man's achievement in conquering nature via science and technology, Bujo Benezet (2003), reiterates

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that such "should not blind us to the ambivalence of modern technology, which can also lead to fear… Value systems can be destroyed by technology; it can go so far as to call into question the autonomy of the human person. To this extent, one realises that the crisis of modernity is increasing even as modern science and technology create a monoculture through colonial interference, introducing and imposing Western culture on African thought and culture. Without taking the time to study our traditional cultural heritage, the West branded it as crude and devilish yet many of these artefacts were carted away to their museums amidst the financial gains attached. This disparagement of African culture facilitated the imposition of Western democracy as against our *Ohazurume* (Ohacracy) and the *Igwebuike* system of governance. More so, the concept of abomination was part of African culture and life before the advent of Christian morality and the concept of sin. However, the ideas of inculturation and enculturation are all welcome but the act of total emancipation of African value system keeps one in total mental slavery.

African problems culminate in African predicaments, even as people in other parts of the world experience changes and challenges especially as Africa forms part of Global South facing global challenges. Modern technologies in the bid of conquering and transforming the world are creating monocultures that will definitely affect ethics governing human actions. Few people, unfortunately, are troubled by this complex problem especially in Africa, where globalisation, mass media, and global cultures are relatively new phenomena. African ethics, as a system of values highly cherished by Africans, is understood by many scholars as anthropocentric and communitarian. Many scholars, above all Western thinkers have long asserted that African ethics is exclusively anthropocentric, cosmic and theocentric. This is why Bujo, B. (2003) maintains that "the main goal of African ethics is fundamentally life itself. The community must guarantee the promotion and protection of life by specifying and ordaining ethics and morality." African ethics thrives on the relational dimension as expressed in many conceptual forms of Afromodals or relatedness as in *Ujamaa, Ubuntu, Igwebuike, Njikoka* and Belongingness, etc. This is summarised in the existential expression *cognatus sum, ergo sum* (I am related; therefore, I am). A synthesis of African ethics, without the idea of pluralism and the possibility of universal validity in ethics, would need to accommodate the demands of faith alongside conventional moral requirements within the sense of orthodoxy unto orthopraxis. However, there are models of African ethics expressed through ethical conduct in the community via the lessons learnt from fairy tales, proverbs, riddles and initiations communicating decisive ethical roles and good behaviours with a form of encrypted wisdom and values.

Appreciation of Igbo Bioethical Ideology: A Scrap of Life (*Mkpomkpo Ndụ*) and A Scrap of Death (*Mkpomkpo Ọnwụ*) in African Bioethics

Mkpomkpo ndụ, literally *a scrap, remnant, or fragment of life* in Igbo thought and culture, names a profound existential condition rather than a mere biological state. It refers to life lived in its most fragile, weakened and threatened form, yet still affirmed and appreciated as such as life. Within African philosophy, especially Igbo ontology, *ndụ* (life) is a primary value, very sacred, communal and divinely grounded. Therefore, even in its *scraps* (*mkpomkpo*), it possess meaning, dignity and moral weight. *Mkpomkpo ndụ* describes life reduced to its bare minimum, a life marked by illness, disability, old age, extreme weakness, or social abandonment. It is the kind of life that survives moment by moment, not by strength but by patience and endurance. Such a life often appears unproductive, dependent, or burdensome when measured by utilitarian or economic standards. Yet in African thought, fragility does not negate value. Rather, it reveals the depth of what life truly is: not power, but persistence. A *scrap of life* means the tiniest, smallest, weakest or most fragile remnant of life that still remains, life reduced to its bare minimum, yet not completely destroyed nor extinguished. Its core meaning is within the boundaries of a tiny remainder of life (life that survives only in fragments, not in fullness), bare survival (existence marked more by patient endurance than by flourishing) and life on the edge (life that is constantly

threatened by death, suffering, or deprivation). It is a life too fragile to be handled. It has a more figurative sense and critical use. Hence, in philosophical or cultural usage, especially in African appreciative thought, a *scrap of life* does not mean life has lost its value. Instead, it shows that: life remains fundamentally sacred even when weakened. Equally, it means existence, however fragile, is preferable to non-existence. Morally, calling life *a scrap* does not diminish it; instead, it foregrounds human vulnerability as it condemns philosophies that treat life as disposable. More, it challenges euthanasia or death-as-solution ideologies. A scrap of life means being alive, even when one barely breaths thereby enduring, hoping, rather than not existing at all. Equally, it entails that such life retains dignity even in pain, poverty, sickness or dependency. This resounds powerfully within the boundaries of Igbo Weltanschauung and broader African worldviews where life (*ndụ*) is primarily cherished not because it is comfortable, but because it is life. In African (Igbo) worldview, a *scrap of life* is equal to expressions like: *ndụ fọdụrụ ntakịrị* (life that remains only a little), *ndụ ka mma karia ọnwụ* (life is better than death). A *scrap of life* shows the unique primacy of life. Hence, life still a gift from *Chukwu* (God), therefore, it still holds communal meaning and allows for hope, intervention and continuity. Hence, the proverb *mkpomkpo ndụ ka mkpomkpo ọnwụ mma*, a scrap of life is better than a scrap of death.

Mkpomkpo Ọnwụ, literally "a scrap, fragment, or residue of death," It is a deeply evocative concept in Igbo philosophy. Unlike *mkpomkpo ndụ,* which still affirms life even in its weakest form, *mkpomkpo ọnwụ* represents the threshold where life has collapsed into irreversible negation. It is not merely biological death. It is the condition in which death is accepted, chosen, or normalized as an answer to suffering. In African and Igbo worldviews, this is a state to be dreaded, resisted, and averted at all costs. Therefore, in Igbo worldview death is not about annihilation as there is concepts like after death and ancestors. Though people fear death and dread it at all costs and want to live at all costss, hence, death never spells a total closure nor is it the last-card-check-up of life. However, in African-Igbo metaphysics, *ọnwụ* (death) is often seen as a rupture, not merely a solution. However, *mkpomkpo ọnwụ,* therefore, signifies the final closure of actively earthly participation in life, community, moral agency, destiny (*chi)* and all forms of Afromodality. This is the evil of death. While death is acknowledged as inevitable, it is never celebratively hastened to. But life is celebrated in life and after life. A scrap of death is, therefore, non-meaningful because death has no degrees of value. Death seems to simply annihilate life's afromodalism. Thus, where mkpomkpo ndụ retains potentialities mkpomkpo ọnwụ abolishes such. In sum, the Igbos' revolutionary and profound fear of death is not out of cowardliness but out of cosmic reverence for life. To dread death is to honor *ndụ*. In this intelligible appreciation, as against death with many expressions of resistance to mkpomkpo ọnwụ, such as: sickness is treated aggressively, even when hope is thin; elders cling to life despite pain and families exhaust resources to keep a dying member alive.

The expression "a scrap of death" does not merely denote physical dying or biological cessation. Within the boundaries of African philosophical worldview, scrap of death signifies death in fragments where death is anticipated, invoked, flirted with, or partially embraced as a solution to human predicament expressed in pain and suffering. Unlike a scrap of life, which still participates in existence, a scrap of death participates in negation, rupture, and moral disorder. In African metaphysics, death (ọnwụ) is not a mere neutral or private event. It is a cosmic and communal rupture that affects the living, the ancestors and the unborn. Mbiti (1969) insists that death is "the removal of a person from the human community," even though the dead may continue in ancestral existence. To seek or deliberately hasten death, however small the justification, introduces death prematurely into the moral order, thereby creating what may be called a scrap of death. Metaphysically, scrap of death refers to essentially making a choice of non-being over existential being at all cost. Especially with regard to negative innuendoes thereby introducing death as

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remedy and reducing human dignity to functionality or comfort. As well, it means treating death instrumentally in disregard to other benefits of death and dying. In African metaphysics, death is not something to be sampled, managed or controlled rather it is something to be feared not merely because it ends life, but because it breaks continuity, disrupts destiny and weakens communal bonds (Gyekye, 1995). Thus, even the thought of a scrap of death is a moral and metaphysical failure.

Culture of Throwaway and Culture of Belongingness

The culture of throwaway and the culture of belongingness represent two opposed ethical orientations toward human beings, relationships, institutions and the wider world. A throwaway culture is structured by the logic of disposal: what is considered useless, unproductive, inconvenient, outdated, or burdensome is discarded. Its operative vocabulary includes reject, exclude, abandon, replace, discard, neglect, remove and dispose. In such a culture, value becomes conditional upon usefulness. Human beings can consequently be treated as expendable when they cease to satisfy dominant economic, social, political, or technological expectations. Pope Francis (2013) identifies this tendency as a "throwaway culture" in which persons and things can be reduced to objects of utility. Against this logic stands the culture of belongingness, whose fundamental movement is not disposal but retention and relationship. Its vocabulary is, therefore, significant: keep, save, retain, conserve, hold on to, protect, preserve, shelter, care for, embrace, and restore. These are not merely alternative words; they express an alternative ontology and ethics. To keep is to affirm that something has continuing worth; to save is to refuse abandonment; to retain is to resist premature exclusion; to conserve is to protect value across time; and to hold on to is to remain committed even when circumstances make abandonment easier.

Belongingness thus introduces a different criterion of value. The question is no longer, "What use is this person?", but "To whom does this person belong, and how can that belonging be sustained?" Belonging transforms the vulnerable from disposable objects into relational subjects. The elderly, the sick, the poor, migrants, children, persons with disabilities, survivors of abuse, and socially excluded persons are not problems to be removed but members to be kept within the circle of human concern. From an African philosophical perspective, this resonates with the communal understanding of personhood in which the human being is constituted through relationships. Belongingness, therefore, becomes an ethical resistance to disposability: where throwaway culture says "let go," belongingness says "hold on"; where it says "discard," belongingness says "retain"; where it excludes, belongingness includes; and where it abandons, belongingness protects and restores.

Human Vulnerability and the Problem of Exclusion

Human vulnerability is a fundamental condition of human existence. To be human is to be exposed to dependence, suffering, weakness, loss, ageing, displacement, abuse, social instability, and the possibility of being harmed by forces beyond one's control. Vulnerability, therefore, should not be understood merely as an individual deficiency or a condition belonging exclusively to particular social groups. Rather, it reveals the relational character of human existence: human beings require others for protection, recognition, care, development, and flourishing. In this sense, vulnerability is not necessarily a negation of human dignity; it can disclose the profound interdependence through which human life becomes meaningful. This understanding resonates strongly with African conceptions of personhood. African philosophy generally resists an atomistic conception of the human being as an isolated and self-sufficient individual. Mbiti's well-known formulation, "I am because we are," expresses the conviction that individual existence is embedded within communal relationships (Mbiti, 1969). Menkiti (1984) similarly argues that personhood is deeply constituted through incorporation into the community and participation in its moral life. Gyekye (1997), while resisting an excessively collectivist interpretation of African communitarianism, nevertheless maintains that individual existence and

communal life are mutually related. African personhood thus accommodates individuality without severing the individual from the network of relationships within which human life is sustained. Recent scholarship likewise identifies relationality, social participation, reciprocity, and communal responsibility as central dimensions of African philosophical accounts of personhood.

The problem arises when vulnerability is transformed from a condition requiring communal response into a basis for social exclusion. A vulnerable person may be perceived as dependent, unproductive, burdensome, inconvenient, or incapable of contributing to society. Once such perceptions become socially institutionalised, vulnerability becomes a mechanism through which persons are pushed towards the margins of communal life. The migrant may become a stranger; the displaced person, an unwanted outsider; the elderly, a burden; the abused person may be regarded as a source of shame; the child, an inconvenient responsibility; and the digitally vulnerable, invisible within increasingly technological social structures. Exclusion therefore does more than separate people physically or socially: it communicates the damaging message that some lives matter less than others.

This is philosophically significant because exclusion contradicts the relational foundations of African personhood. If human existence is fundamentally constituted through relationships, then to exclude a person is not simply to remove that person from participation; it is to disrupt a relationship that contributes to the moral constitution of the community itself. Onebunne's formulation of **Being as Belongingness** makes this point more explicitly: being is fundamentally relational, and belongingness constitutes an essential dimension of being (Onebunne, 2019). His argument that belongingness is a definitive principle of African communalism further suggests that communal existence cannot be adequately understood apart from the relationships through which persons belong to one another.

Consequently, the ethical question is not simply **how society should manage vulnerable people**, but **how society should relate to persons whose vulnerability reveals humanity's shared condition**. From an African ethical standpoint, vulnerability should evoke solidarity rather than rejection, care rather than abandonment, and inclusion rather than disposability. The movement from vulnerability to exclusion therefore marks the beginning of the ethical crisis examined in this paper. Once belonging is denied, vulnerability can become the doorway through which a person is gradually rendered invisible, socially expendable, and ultimately disposable.

From Exclusion to Throwaway Culture: The Ethics of Disposability

Exclusion becomes ethically more troubling when it develops from isolated acts of marginalisation into a **social culture of disposability**. Exclusion denies persons meaningful participation in the social community; disposability goes further by treating certain persons as having little or no value once they cease to satisfy dominant social, economic, political, or cultural expectations. The movement from exclusion to throwaway culture therefore represents a transition from **being pushed aside to being regarded as expendable**. Pope Francis captures this transformation in *Evangelii Gaudium* when he argues that contemporary exclusion can reduce human beings to consumer goods that may be used and discarded (Francis, 2013).

The logic of disposability is particularly visible wherever human worth is measured principally by productivity, economic usefulness, consumption, independence, or social visibility. Within such a framework, those who cannot compete effectively are easily classified as burdens: the unemployed as unproductive, the poor as dependent, older persons as economically inactive, migrants as unwanted outsiders, persons with disabilities as incapable, and vulnerable children as

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burdensome. What begins as inequality can consequently become a deeper denial of social belonging. Francis (2013) observes that exclusion does not merely place people at the margins; it can remove them from meaningful participation in society altogether. This is why **throwaway culture is fundamentally an ethical problem rather than merely an economic one**. It reflects a defective anthropology in which the value of the person becomes conditional upon usefulness. When utility becomes the measure of worth, human beings are valued instrumentally rather than intrinsically. Clark and Alford (2019) similarly argue that the throwaway culture identified by Francis extends beyond material waste to the treatment of human beings as disposable within systems shaped by consumerism and exclusion. The ethical danger is therefore not simply that some people receive fewer resources, but that society gradually becomes capable of regarding their exclusion as normal.

Disposability also produces what may be described as **ethical invisibility**. Once people are perceived as irrelevant to the dominant social order, their suffering becomes easier to ignore. Francis (2013) describes this condition as a "globalization of indifference," in which people become increasingly incapable of responding compassionately to the suffering of others. The excluded person consequently experiences not only material deprivation but also a loss of recognition, voice, participation, and social significance. From an African ethical perspective, this logic is particularly problematic because it contradicts relational understandings of human existence. If personhood is embedded within communal relationships, then declaring another person disposable constitutes more than an injustice against an individual; it damages the moral fabric of the community itself. Disposability therefore represents a rupture of relationality. It transforms **difference into distance, vulnerability into exclusion, and exclusion into abandonment**. The ethical challenge, consequently, is to reject the assumption that human worth depends upon usefulness. A person does not belong because the person produces, competes, consumes, or conforms. Rather, **belonging must precede usefulness**. This principle prepares the philosophical transition to the next section: if throwaway culture is rooted in the denial of belonging, then an African philosophy grounded in **Being as Belongingness** can provide a fundamental ethical alternative.

African Relational Personhood and the Ethics of Belongingness

African philosophical anthropology provides a strong foundation for challenging the logic of disposability through its fundamentally relational understanding of the human person. Unlike conceptions that construe the individual primarily as autonomous and self-sufficient, many African traditions understand personhood within a network of relationships, obligations, recognition, and communal participation. Menkiti (1984) famously argues that African conceptions of personhood give significant weight to the community in the formation of the person, while Gyekye (1997) proposes a more moderate communitarianism that preserves individual autonomy without denying the constitutive importance of communal relationships. Contemporary discussions continue to identify relationality as a major feature of African accounts of personhood (Jecker, 2022).

Relationality, however, must move beyond a descriptive claim about how Africans live together to become a **normative ethical principle**. Metz (2007) develops an African moral theory around harmonious relationships, interpreting ubuntu in terms of identifying with others and exhibiting solidarity toward them. On this account, African ethics requires more than physical coexistence; it demands relationships characterised by mutual recognition, participation, care, and concern for the good of others. This relational orientation directly challenges throwaway culture because the latter separates human worth from relationship and makes dignity dependent upon utility. It is within this philosophical context that **Being as Belongingness** becomes especially significant.

Onebunne (2019) advances belongingness as a definitive principle of African communalism, maintaining that human existence and meaningful participation in society acquire their significance through belongingness. Belongingness, accordingly, is deeper than geographical location, group membership, emotional attachment, or social acceptance. It expresses an ontological-relational condition: **to be is to belong within a web of relationships through which existence acquires recognition, responsibility, and meaning**. Related work on migration and belongingness similarly situates belongingness within African metaphysical reflection on existence and communal togetherness (Onebunne & Onwuatuegwu, 2020).

This ontological insight generates an ethical imperative. If the human person exists through belonging, then belonging cannot remain ethically neutral. Belongingness entails responsibility. The presence of the other makes a claim upon the community for recognition, protection, care, solidarity, and restoration. Hence, the vulnerable person does not lose belonging because of weakness, age, displacement, disability, poverty, abuse, or diminished productivity. Rather, vulnerability intensifies the community's ethical responsibility toward that person. An African ethics of belongingness can therefore formulate its fundamental principle as follows: no person is disposable because every person belongs. Whatever diminishes the dignity of one person consequently wounds the relational integrity of the community. Against throwaway culture, *Being as Belongingness* transforms communal relationship from mere social connectedness into ethical responsibility, making the protection of vulnerable persons a requirement of authentic communal existence.

***Mkpọmkpọ Ndu* and the African Principle of Non-Disposability**

The philosophical movement from belongingness to non-disposability requires an ethical principle capable of affirming the value of life even under conditions of vulnerability. Within the Igbo ethical imagination, the maxim *mkpomkpo ndu ka mkpomkpo onwu mma,* literally expressing a preference for a remnant or scrap of life over a remnant or scrap of death—can be interpreted as a profound affirmation of life. Rather than treating weakened, diminished, or vulnerable existence as worthless, the maxim expresses an ethical preference for preserving life wherever life remains possible. It therefore provides an important African philosophical resource for challenging contemporary cultures that classify certain human beings as expendable.

The significance of this maxim becomes clearer when situated within African relational ethics. African moral thought frequently connects the good of the individual with the wellbeing of the community. Metz (2007) argues that a central African moral insight associated with *ubuntu* is the promotion of harmonious relationships grounded in shared identity and solidarity. Such relationships require recognition of others as members of a common moral world. Metz and Gaie (2010) similarly reconstruct African ethics around harmonious communal relationships and the moral importance of solidarity. From this perspective, *mkpomkpo ndụ* can be read as more than a proverb about physical survival. It expresses a principle of non-disposability: diminished human capacity does not erase human worth. A person does not become disposable because of poverty, sickness, old age, disability, displacement, abuse, dependency, or reduced productivity. The ethical task is instead to preserve, support, and restore life. This interpretation complements the African ethical emphasis on solidarity with vulnerable persons and on relationships that sustain communal life. Metz's account of African morality specifically recognises solidarity with vulnerable communities as an important moral intuition, while his later relational theory places communal relationship at the centre of African moral reasoning (Metz, 2007, 2022).

The maxim therefore provides a significant counterpoint to throwaway culture. Throwaway culture asks whether a person remains sufficiently useful, productive, independent, or socially valuable to deserve attention. *Mkpomkpo ndu* reverses this logic: life itself establishes a claim

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upon ethical responsibility. The ethical worth of the vulnerable does not depend upon the quantity of life, its productivity, or its conformity to dominant expectations. Even what society may regard as a "scrap" of life remains preferable to abandonment and social death. Consequently, *mkpomkpo ndụ* can be philosophically developed as an African principle of life-preservation, non-abandonment, solidarity, and communal responsibility. It reinforces the central claim of this paper: no person is disposable because every person belongs. Belongingness therefore becomes the metaphysical ground of non-disposability, while mkpomkpo ndu gives that belongingness an ethical imperative, to preserve life, protect dignity, resist abandonment, and restore those pushed towards the margins.

From Belongingness to Ethical Restoration: Toward an African Culture of Human Flourishing

The movement from throwaway culture to a culture of belongingness must ultimately culminate in **ethical restoration**. If exclusion begins by denying a person's place within the community, and disposability completes that process by treating the person as expendable, belongingness provides the philosophical basis for reversing this movement. Belongingness is, therefore, not simply a feeling of being accepted or a descriptive condition of membership. Within the African philosophical framework developed in this paper, it is an **ethical obligation to recognise the other as a participant in shared existence and to act for the preservation of the relationships that sustain human life**. Metz (2022) similarly develops an African relational moral theory in which communal relationship is not merely a means to another good but an important moral end in itself.

This makes belongingness particularly significant for the vulnerable. A person who has been excluded does not merely require material assistance; such a person requires **recognition, participation, protection, care, and restoration of social and moral agency**. African relational ethics provides a strong basis for this position because human existence is understood through relationships rather than through isolated individuality. Jecker (2022) notes that African relational ethics places significant emphasis on the intertwined nature of human existence and connects dignity with the capacity for communal relationships, care, and solidarity. Thus, the vulnerable person remains a bearer of dignity even when poverty, displacement, age, disability, abuse, or other circumstances have weakened the person's social position. Within ***Being as Belongingness***, this argument becomes more radical. Onebunne's formulation of belongingness as an African metaphysics of "to be" locates belongingness within the very meaning of existence rather than treating it merely as a social arrangement (Onebunne & Onwuatuegwu, 2020). If belongingness belongs to the structure of being, then exclusion becomes more than social marginalisation: it represents an ethical violation of the relational conditions through which human existence is affirmed. Consequently, restoration must seek to reconnect persons with the community from which they have been separated.

Ethical restoration therefore involves a movement through **recognition, inclusion, care, protection, participation, and flourishing**. Recognition acknowledges the person's dignity; inclusion restores the person's place within the community; care responds to vulnerability; protection resists further harm; participation restores agency; and flourishing represents the ultimate goal. This progression transforms belongingness from a philosophical concept into a practical ethical principle. It also prevents African communitarianism from becoming merely an idealisation of community, because authentic community must be judged by whether it protects the dignity of those most susceptible to exclusion. African relational ethics can, indeed, support respect for individual dignity even where individuals challenge oppressive communal structures (Jecker, 2022). The implication is that **the moral health of a society can be measured by how it**

treats those whom it has the greatest temptation to discard. A society that protects only the strong, productive, visible, and socially useful remains captive to the logic of disposability. By contrast, a society that preserves the dignity and belonging of vulnerable persons embodies a deeper understanding of humanity. Metz's relational moral theory similarly grounds ethical action in relationships characterised by harmony, solidarity, and respect rather than utility alone (Metz, 2022).

Thus, the movement from throwaway culture to belongingness is ultimately a movement **from disposability to responsibility, from exclusion to inclusion, and from abandonment to restoration**. Belongingness becomes the ethical pathway through which African philosophy can challenge contemporary cultures of disposability and reaffirm the intrinsic dignity of every person. Human flourishing consequently cannot be conceived as the achievement of isolated individuals; it is a **shared condition of persons who belong to one another and assume responsibility for one another**. The African ethical response to vulnerability is therefore not simply to prevent people from being discarded, but to create conditions in which every person can remain recognised, protected, connected, and capable of flourishing.

A Culture of Belongingness Against a Culture of Throwaway in the Shared Community of Life

A **culture of belongingness** offers a fundamental ethical alternative to the contemporary **culture of throwaway** because it refuses to determine human worth according to usefulness, productivity, status, age, strength, or social visibility. While throwaway culture operates through exclusion, abandonment, and disposability, belongingness begins from the conviction that every person has an irreducible place within the shared community of life. From an African philosophical perspective, the human being is not an isolated entity but a relational being whose existence is embedded in networks of family, community, nature, and shared responsibility. Mbiti's (1969) classical formulation, "I am because we are," captures this relational understanding of human existence, while Menkiti (1984) emphasises the community's constitutive role in African conceptions of personhood. The culture of throwaway is fundamentally opposed to this relational ontology. It reduces persons to their functional value and renders those who appear unproductive, dependent, inconvenient, or vulnerable increasingly invisible. Pope Francis (2013) describes this phenomenon through the notion of a "throwaway culture," in which human beings themselves can become objects of exclusion. Such a culture fragments the community by creating distinctions between those considered valuable and those considered expendable. Its deepest failure is therefore not merely economic inequality but the **ethical denial of belonging**.

A culture of belongingness reverses this logic. Its foundational principle is that no person is disposable because every person belongs. Belongingness is consequently more than inclusion in a geographical or social group. It is an ethical recognition that the existence of each person is intertwined with the existence of others. Onebunne's (2019) thesis of Being as Belongingness deepens this argument by locating belongingness within the meaning of being itself. If to be is, fundamentally, to belong, then excluding another person is not simply to deny participation; it is to undermine the relational conditions through which human existence is affirmed. The phrase shared community of life further extends this ethical vision. The community should not be conceived merely as a collection of human individuals but as an interconnected field in which persons have reciprocal responsibilities toward one another. African communitarian thought emphasises solidarity, mutuality, and the pursuit of harmonious relationships (Metz, 2007). The wellbeing of the vulnerable therefore cannot be separated from the wellbeing of the community. To abandon the elderly, exclude the migrant, neglect the child, stigmatise the abused, or disregard

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the displaced ultimately impoverishes the community itself.

Belongingness consequently transforms vulnerability into an occasion for solidarity rather than rejection. It demands recognition, protection, care, participation, and restoration. In this sense, **the dignity of the most vulnerable becomes a measure of the moral health of the whole community**. A culture of belongingness does not merely prevent people from being thrown away; it creates a social and ethical order in which every person is recognised as a bearer of dignity and a participant in the shared community of life. It is therefore a movement from **disposability to responsibility, exclusion to inclusion, and fragmentation to relational wholeness**.

The African Ethical Principle of Non-Disposability: Belongingness as Responsibility

The foregoing analysis establishes that the deepest opposition to throwaway culture is not simply inclusion but **belongingness as an ethical structure of human existence**. African relational philosophy provides the basis for understanding the human person not as an isolated and self-sufficient entity but as one whose being is constituted and sustained through relationships. Mbiti (1969) captures this relational orientation in the well-known affirmation that "I am because we are," while Menkiti (1984) emphasises the constitutive significance of community in African conceptions of personhood. Within this framework, the exclusion of another person is not merely a failure of social participation; it represents a disturbance of the relational order through which persons and communities exist.

This insight becomes more philosophically explicit in Onebunne's thesis of **Being as Belongingness**. If belongingness is integral to being, then every human being possesses an original claim to belonging before questions of usefulness, productivity, status, capacity, or social contribution arise (Onebunne, 2019). Belongingness therefore becomes the ontological ground of an African ethical principle of **non-disposability**: **no person is disposable because every person belongs**. The principle reverses the logic of throwaway culture. Instead of asking whether a person remains sufficiently useful to deserve recognition, it begins with the prior recognition that the person already belongs and therefore possesses a claim upon communal responsibility. Non-disposability consequently transforms belongingness from a condition into an ethical obligation. To recognise that another belongs is to accept responsibility for that person's dignity, protection, participation, and wellbeing. African relational ethics supports this movement from relationship to responsibility. Metz (2007) argues that African moral thought gives central importance to harmonious relationships, solidarity, and identification with others. Thus, authentic belonging cannot remain passive. It demands **recognition, inclusion, care, protection, participation, restoration, and flourishing**.

This principle is particularly significant in relation to vulnerability. Vulnerable persons do not belong because they are objects of charity; they belong because they are persons. Vulnerability therefore does not create dignity but reveals the community's responsibility to uphold dignity. The elderly person, displaced person, abused person, migrant, child, poor person, or digitally vulnerable person remains a participant in the shared community of life even when circumstances threaten that participation. The ethical failure occurs when vulnerability is interpreted as evidence that a person has become burdensome or expendable.

The Igbo maxim mkpomkpo ndụ ka mkpomkpo ọnwụ mma reinforces this African preference for life over abandonment and social death. Read philosophically, it expresses a commitment to preserving whatever possibility of life, relationship, and participation remains rather than surrendering persons to disposability. It therefore complements the metaphysical insight of belongingness with an ethical imperative of life-preservation and non-abandonment. The African ethical claim that emerges is consequently stronger than a simple appeal for social tolerance: to

discard another is to damage the community of which both belong. The community's moral integrity is inseparable from the dignity of its most vulnerable members. Hence, the movement from being to belongingness, from belongingness to responsibility, and from responsibility to restoration provides an African ethical pathway from disposability to human flourishing. A truly belonging community does not merely keep people from being thrown away; it creates conditions in which every person can remain recognised, connected, protected, valued, and capable of flourishing.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the movement from throwaway culture to a culture of belongingness represents a fundamental ethical transformation in the understanding of human vulnerability and dignity. Throwaway culture emerges when human worth is measured by productivity, utility, status, visibility, or conformity, converting vulnerability into exclusion and exclusion into disposability. Against this logic, African relational philosophy offers a fundamentally different anthropology: the human person is a being-in-relation whose existence is inseparable from belonging, mutuality, solidarity, and communal responsibility.

Through the philosophical thesis of **Being as Belongingness**, the paper has advanced a foundational African ethical principle: **no person is disposable because every person belongs**. Belongingness is therefore not merely social inclusion; it is an ethical obligation arising from the relational character of being itself. The Igbo maxim ***mkpomkpo ndu ka mkpomkpo onwu mma*** reinforces this orientation by affirming the preservation of life against abandonment, social death, and disposability. The paper consequently makes a stronger African ethical claim: **a community becomes ethically African not simply by sharing identity, culture, or territory, but by refusing to abandon any of its members to disposability**. The treatment of the vulnerable is thus not peripheral to communal morality; it is its decisive test. African ethics demands that vulnerability evoke solidarity, exclusion evoke restoration, and threatened life evoke communal responsibility. A culture of belongingness therefore constitutes an ethical recovery of the shared community of life—where **to belong is to matter, to matter is to be cared for, and to care for the other is to preserve the moral being of the community itself**.

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