


Post-foundational theology and the contribution of African approaches to consciousness and identity

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How do we know who we are? What sources can we draw upon in order to explain and understand the complex notions of identity and consciousness? This article revisits this debate and argues that African approaches to the consciousness and identity cohere with Wentzel van Huyssteen's post-foundational theology. Post-foundational theology offers a transverse rationality that operates between explanatory power and truth. The impetus for the research that informs this article emerged from a conversation with Prof. Van Huyssteen in 2000. The conversation set the author on a path of exploration which led to the discovery of the richness of African religious, philosophical and social resources on identity and consciousness. The outcome was an integrated approach to identity known as a 'generous ontology' that draws upon subjective, objective, inter-subjective and inter-objective sources of knowledge. The article concludes that an African approach to consciousness, as a post-foundational theological contribution, helps us to offer clear explanations and deeper truths in relation to our understanding of identity and consciousness.

Intradisciplinary and or interdisciplinary implications: This article presents a post-foundationalist argument for the inclusion of African theological notions of identity and consciousness in the debates of this field that take place at the intersections of faith and science. The outcome textures our explanations and deepens our understandings of transdisciplinary approaches to identity and consciousness.

Keywords: Wentzel van Huyssteen; African theology; post-foundationalism; identity; consciousness; generous ontology.

Introduction

Wentzel van Huyssteen's work makes a valuable contribution to debates on the rationality and plausibility of theological claims in relation to assertions to truth that arise from the natural and social sciences. His project contended that 'theology emerges as a reasoning strategy', that is, 'on par with the intellectual integrity and legitimacy of the natural, human, and social sciences' (Van Huyssteen 2006:14). He argued that knowledge at the intersection of theology and science revolves around questions of rationality and intelligibility. In particular, Van Huyssteen highlighted the relationship 'between *explanatory power* and *truth*' that emerges when both religious beliefs and scientific claims are taken seriously (Van Huyssteen 1997:163).

The relationship between explanatory power and truth highlights an important tension, particularly considering recent clashes related to truth claims from faith and science. Clashes between scientific knowledge and religious belief since the COVID-19 pandemic began have illustrated that our approaches to truth and explanation have inadvertently been placed at odds with one another in the popular imagination. Of course, this is an extreme example of how differing forms of knowledge could mistakenly be placed in opposing tension, thereby diminishing the possibility of both explanatory power and a greater seeking after the truth. To some extent, this has arisen as a consequence of modernity where foundationalist knowledge and non-foundationalist knowledge are sometimes pitted against each other.

In this article, we will focus on a less obvious, but equally important, debate at the intersections of explanation and truth in theology and science. We will focus on how an African theological approach to identity can help us to develop more nuanced and textured explanations, and deeper

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and more detailed understandings of the complexities of human identity and consciousness in relation to a post-foundationalist theological approach.

The choice for Wentzel van Huyssteen's post-foundationalist theological approach

The reader may ask why such a conversation should take place in relation to post-foundationalist theological thinking? Wentzel van Huyssteen's post-foundationalist theology addresses some of the significant challenges that arise from the exclusive certainties of modernity – that is, foundationalism. At the same time, his approach is also capable of engaging notions of relativism that some fear may emerge from thoroughgoing post-modernist approach – that is, non-foundationalism.

It is important to understand that there is both a positive and a negative approach to post-foundational theology. The 'negative strategy tries to undermine the persuasiveness of foundationalism and non-foundationalism by showing how they undercut the possibility of rational deliberation', since they allow one to protect one's foundational beliefs from criticism (Reeves 2013:134). This is a necessary consideration, as we shall see, in relation to the discussion that will unfold in this article. Any approach to consciousness and identity that is so rooted in contextual reality that it has no wider validity, is inadequate. At the same time, any approach to consciousness and identity that is thoroughly universal, thus having little contextual coherence or applicability, is also inadequate. In a post-foundationalist sense, an African contribution to identity and consciousness will show that some contemporary westernised approaches to identity, which are largely individualistic and materialist, are inadequate.

Next, there is what Reeves characterises as Van Huyssteen's 'positive argument for post-foundationalism'. This is an approach that strikes a balance between 'in person – and situation-relative' knowledge that has a rational strategy with 'universal intent' (Reeves 2013:135; Van Huyssteen 2006:155). In this sense, 'post-foundationalism is able to chart a third way between differing intuitions about the nature of human rationality' (Reeves 2013:135). As we shall see, African approaches to identity and consciousness are valuable for the wider debate, precisely because they are so particular. It is their very particularity that connects them with the human experience, and embodied reality, in universal terms.

Thus, whether one uses a positive, negative or mixed post-foundationalist approach, the outcome is that one becomes more capable of presenting a rational and intelligible contribution to knowledge. This contribution is 'closer to the truth' since it draws upon the unique contributions and differences that emerge in 'epistemological focus, the experiential resources, and the heuristic structures of different disciplines' (Van Huyssteen 2006:160, 187). It is for

this reason that this article argues for the importance of an African approach to identity and consciousness within the wider debates on these subjects in science and theology.

A generous ontology (revisited)

How do we know who we are? More precisely, how do I know that I am me? The question of an African contribution to studies on identity, and the notion of identity claims, was first addressed by this author in an article entitled, *A generous ontology: Identity as a process of intersubjective discovery – An African theological contribution*, more than a decade ago (Forster 2010a:1–12). The author claimed that the 'question "who am I?" is fundamental to human existence and particularly so for persons of faith' (Forster 2010a:2). The notion of personhood – who I am – is both subjective and objective in nature. Neither a purely subjective nor an exclusively objective explanation of selfhood can claim to be entirely true. Who I am is related to my subjective experience of being myself, as well as the objective recognition (by the self and others) of who I am. The late theologian, Du Toit (ed. 2004), wrote:

[I]t is part of human nature to question human personhood. What it is to be human, and it is that which constitutes personhood that belongs to borderline questions like 'Why are we here?', 'What are we destined for?' and 'What should we be doing?' We cannot respond to these questions by simply referring to metaphysical, ideological, philosophical or religious convictions which exclude the way our physical and cultural environments codetermine the views we hold. Significant changes in our physical or cultural environment inevitably pose new questions to personhood and modify the answers we give. (p. 1)

The central focus of his argument is important in the context of this article. The aspects of both subjective and objective realities (what he refers to as the contextual and environmental elements) have a significant impact on the shaping of a person's unique identity and consciousness.

In keeping with this reasoning, the 2010 article argued that some answers to the question, 'who am I?', are foundational and objective (they can be observed and quantified – such as height, geographical location, visually identifiable characteristics, etc.), whilst other answers to the question are qualitatively subjective, and often non-foundational, in nature (e.g. my memories, my emotions, my beliefs, my experiences of being 'me' etc.). It was concluded that neither of these approaches, foundational or non-foundational, could adequately or fully answer the question 'who am I?' (Forster 2010a:2, 10). Hence, the conclusion was that instead of being 'a lone subject, or a quantifiable and containable object, we are all "inter-subjects"' and that human consciousness and identity 'is beyond one single quantifiable truth, it is generous' (Forster 2010a:10). The notion of inter-subjectivity that was central to the argument emerged through a study of African philosophical and theological notions of identity. Aspects of these African inter-subjective notions will be presented in the sections that follow.

The research that was published in the 2010 article arose from a conversation amongst the authors, Prof. Wentzel van Huyssteen, Prof. Dirk J. Smit and Prof. Ernst Conradie in 2000. The conversation partners encouraged the author to find ways to contribute to the debate on identity and consciousness through the inclusion of some African theological and philosophical perspectives. The intention was to search for more adequate explanations, and deeper truths, in relation to identity and consciousness. It was a tentative, although not explicit, engagement with post-foundationalist theology.

In what follows, we shall consider some aspects of the research that emerged since that conversation in 2000. We will build upon Wentzel van Huyssteen's post-foundationalist theology to argue for the importance of attending to African notions of personhood in order to arrive at a more 'generous ontology' that is closer to the truth of what identity and consciousness might encompass (Forster 2010a:1).

Why an African contribution to a generous ontology is worth considering

This is not an idealistic, romantic or uncritical presentation of the (variety of) African contexts. Rather, it argues, in its most basic form, that in subjective, objective and inter-subjective terms, Africa and Africans have an important contribution to make to our understandings of identity and consciousness studies. Simply stated, it would not be possible for a person in an African context to shape her or his understanding of identity by exclusively using Western, North American or European descriptors and frameworks. Whilst notions of 'being' from the aforementioned contexts may offer valuable insight into identity in a generalised sense, they fall short in one crucial area, since they are not contextually appropriate to African experiences of reality. Thus, at some level, they may offer insight into a generalised sense of being (in an explanatory sense), but expressing one's true identity would mean moving beyond such generalised explanations towards more contextually thick expressions of identity and experience that emerge within African social, religious and existential contexts. It is not that other experiences, places and claims are not objectively valid. Rather, it is that they lack the capacity to adequately connect to subjective and inter-subjective experiences, to memories, to beliefs, to cultures, to histories and so to meanings. As Van Huyssteen suggested, 'the objects of our interest dictate not only the different strategies but also different views on what could be regarded as adequate forms of explanation' (Van Huyssteen 1997:163).

This gets to the crux of some struggles in contemporary studies of consciousness and identity. At times, these find expression in identity conflicts, such as political identities, gender identities, economic identities and other forms of conflicted social identity (cf., Fukuyama 2018). At other times, these emerge in relation to one's consciousness in the world and the misrecognition of the self, of others and of

one's place and meaning in time (cf., Rosa 2019, 2020). Epistemological and phenomenological approaches to consciousness and identity have sought to provide categories for explaining or understanding human being and consciousness that would hold some measure of universal applicability. Religion and science both make claims about truth, even ultimate truth. Yet, these approaches themselves are frequently blind to their own presuppositions and situatedness in, for example, western scientific epistemology, or western theological paradigms. This article proposes an approach, which is predicated upon an African approach to consciousness and identity, as one further contribution in a field that is rich with scholarship and debate. It is not presented as 'an answer', but more humbly as 'another contribution' to the debate.

The premise is that just as models of identity and consciousness from other contexts can offer some value and insight for Africans, so too, African approaches can offer insights that will qualitatively improve the explanations and understandings of these notions in different contexts. This is by virtue of the fact that the African experience taps into the experience of being human, except, that it does so from what can be delimited (as we shall see) from an important, though often disregarded, context. It is precisely the particularity of the experience that gives it the possibility of contributing beyond its bounds – it is neither foundational (universal), nor non-foundational (relative), rather it is a post-foundationalist contribution.

Thus, we will see how an African approach to consciousness and identity is relatable to the intelligibility of the post-foundational notions which emerges from both 'experience and explanation' (Van Huyssteen 1997:162–163). This necessitates an engagement with scholarship and experience from the perspective of African relational ontology. As Van Huyssteen (1997) said, what:

[I]s real for theology and for science is not the observable but the intelligible, and in both theology and science beliefs and practices are attempts to understand at the deepest level, where understanding can be construed as seeking the best explanation. (p. 163)

It is in this sense that it is argued that an African approach to identity and consciousness can contribute towards our deeper understanding of complex concepts in relation to both the claims of religion and science.

What is meant by the notion of 'African thought'?

There has been significant debate about the notion of a peculiarly African approach to thinking (cf., Du Toit 2009:43–56; Pato 1994:152–156). Of course, one could delimitate such particularity in various ways. These include geography, culture, history, language or contribution. However, in some other senses, there is no such thing as the singular concept of 'African thought' or

an 'African worldview'. As the poem, *Hail! United States of Africa*, shows, we cannot meaningfully speak of 'Africa as a country' (Garvey 2020). As with all large land masses, there are significant differences in vegetation, topography and climate across the continent. Yes, the continent is one land mass, but it is varied and differentiated. This variety has significantly shaped the peoples and cultures of Africa. Amongst them are nomadic subsistence communities and settled farmers. There are traders, craftspeople and intellectuals. There are the very rich, and the very poor. There are light-skinned persons, and dark-skinned persons. Moreover, there are significant differences in language, culture, ethnicity and religion amongst the peoples of Africa. Hence, some have rightly argued that because of the diversity of peoples, cultures and religions that make up the people who live on the African continent, it would be disingenuous to speak of a single approach or philosophy that could accurately be termed an African philosophy (Mudimbe 1985:149–233; Reed & Tishkoff 2006:597–605). The contention is that it would be more accurate to speak of African philosophies, as such a broad statement could better take account of the diversity of persons and experiences that have bearing on African realities (Lockett 2019:197–211).

Yet, in spite of this, Makgoba (1999) argued that:

[I]n general, scholars are ready to accept that there is such a thing as 'Western thought, science, philosophy' They are even willing to entertain the idea of Oriental philosophy or thought or rationality... Equally, scholars know very well that what constitutes Western or Oriental is not uniform or homogeneous. The Americans have diverged from the Europeans, just as there are divergences within the nations of Europe which constitute what is often termed 'Western'. Similarly, the Indians, Japanese, Chinese and Indonesians have diverged over time, but they constitute what people often refer to as the Orientals. These two major categories are essential to the African thought debates, for they not only illustrate intellectual or scholastic dishonesty but also a persistent tendency to assume superiority when it comes to the African issue. (pp. 99–100)

Makgoba's argument is that if it is acceptable to speak of a thought category, such as 'Western thought', based on certain delimitating criteria, such as geographic location, shared history, common worldview, cultural coherence or philosophical similarities, then one should be able to argue for a similar category amongst the people of the African continent (or at least in parts of the continent). One could thus argue for a category called 'African thought' along similar lines of delimitation (Onyeweunyi 1976:513).

Furthermore, he argued that whilst there are many valid and identifiable differences amongst Africans, there are some commonalities that are 'born out of, develops and evolves [sic] from intrinsic and extrinsic factors that [form] a continuum' (Makgoba 1999:100). In a chapter entitled, *Patterns of African thought*, he showed areas in which Africans of various cultural and geographic contexts share some

coherent conceptual frameworks, ideas and commitments that influence the formation of family relationships, societal structures, concepts of royalty, as well as philosophical commitments and shared moral sentiments (Makgoba 1999:100–106).

What determines any thought of any description? In general, human behaviour or characteristics are determined by a culture. Human beings, like all primates, are cultural animals. Simply defined, culture is anything that humans make in contrast to that which they do not make – anything that is natural. The determining factors of any culture are a mixture of many things, but the environment, the instinct to survive and the curiosity to understand and exploit the natural phenomena are integral to it. *Homo sapiens* educates, socialises, speaks, sings and appreciates in ways that are distinct by virtue of exposure and socialisation. Africans, English and Chinese all speak, dance and make music but all *do it differently* and in each case, there is a consistency that can be attributed to the group. (Makgoba 1999:100)

Du Toit (ed. 2004) presented a cautious, yet reasonable, justification for scholars making such general statements about schools of thought as 'African thought' in his book, *The Integrity of the Human Person in an African Context: Perspectives from Science and Religion*. However, he cautioned that such claims should not be made in order to present either 'Africa' or 'the West', as completely definable and differentiated entities (ed. Du Toit 2004:ix). Such intentions are doomed to fail. Yet, there is some identifiable uniqueness and reasonably defensible characterisation of ideas, beliefs, practices, values that can be spoken of as 'African', (or 'Western' for that matter). However, these are clearly not normative categories, rather they point to the value of texturing universal claims with reference to contextual uniqueness and delimited specificity.

In this article, the delimited and contextual insights are gleaned from the philosophies, beliefs, the people and cultures of sub-Saharan Africa. In historical and scientific terms, these people are referred to as the 'Bantu peoples' (Setiloane 1998:66). Theron (1996), from the *Institute for Missiological and Ecumenical Research*, noted that within this geographical and cultural frame of reference:

[T]here are many differences... though, there exist some, and I think enough, similarities between them [*the different cultural and ethnic groups of sub-Saharan Africa*], which enable us to make some generalisations about the African traditional world-views. (p. 1)

Thus, it is in this dialectic sense – between difference and similarity – that we can speak with some measure of cautious confidence of 'African thought' or an 'African worldview' that emerges from the Bantu peoples of Southern Africa (Du Toit 2009:43–44). We can now move on to consider some ways in which an African contribution to identity and consciousness is necessary and important in post-foundationalist terms. Why should we include an African theological contribution to what could be characterised as post-foundationalist notions of identity and consciousness?

A contribution that is sometimes overlooked

One important reason why an African approach to notions of consciousness and identity is important is quite simple because African contributions are frequently overlooked in both the sciences and the theological academy (Grant 2020:50–66; Makgoba 1999:100; Onyeweunyi 1976:513). This poses some obvious problems for African persons, since our identities are formed within our histories, cultures, geographies and beliefs. Much of what forms our consciousness of ourselves and our identities is specifically formed in relation to African existential realities (Forster 2018:77–80, 2019:24–53).

Moreover, it is reasonable to argue that the deliberate exclusion, or ignorant disregard, of African perspectives on identity and consciousness, weakens larger projects of explanation and understanding in non-African contexts. Africans have a necessary and valid contribution to make to studies on identity and consciousness. Firstly, because African realities are rooted in the common human experience. Secondly, as we shall see, African notions of identity and consciousness offer valuable understandings that emerge from perennial philosophies and religious categories that were dominant in all societies before the influence of the age of enlightenment sought to banish such ‘enchanted’ notions from the scientific and religious arenas to the arena of ‘myth’ (Gane 2002:40; Taylor 2009:25–26). Simply stated, such approaches are capable of avoiding the foundationalist pitfalls of modernity and the non-foundational relativism of postmodernity. They connect to the human experience in ways that have largely vanished individualist and materialist approaches to reality.

Tony Balcomb reminded us that even some of the most important philosophers who shaped enlightenment thinking have been divorced from their own ‘enchanted’ and ‘mythic’ roots. He wrote that:

[W]e cannot conceive of the father of modern rationalism coming to his ‘revelation’ through visions and dreams! Yet it tells a story about the way human beings used to view the world and themselves before the Cartesian revolution. Descartes’ ‘discovery’ about himself took place in the context of a world-view that was totally different from the world-view that developed largely as a consequence of his discovery. The primal world-view had been in existence, in one form or another, from the earliest records of *Homo Sapiens sapiens*, in other words from the upper Palaeolithic period, about 35 000 years ago. (Balcomb 2004:59)

Balcomb pointed out that a significant problem of some contemporary engagements with consciousness, from a largely westernised cognitive-rationalist point of view, which largely ignores an integrated or enchanted view of reality, is the challenge of existential disengagement (Balcomb 2004:60). Gunton (1993) described this phenomenon as follows:

[D]isengagement means standing apart from each other and the world and treating the other as external, as a mere object. The

key is the word *instrumental*: We use the other as an instrument, as the mere means for realizing our will, and not as in some way integral to our being. It has its roots in the technocratic attitude: the view that the world is there to do exactly as we choose. (p. 14)

An entirely disenchanted view of reality, characterised by disengagement of various forms, is inadequate to explain the reality of consciousness, or offer a deep and credible understanding of identity. Hence, Balcomb pointed to Gunton’s contention that later interpreters of Descartes weakened the notion that the ‘social order... [is] rooted in some way in an insight into ... the order of being as a whole’, and that ‘without a philosophy of engagement we are lost’ (Balcomb 2004:59–60; Gunton 1993:15) (1993:15, quoted in Balcomb 2004). In this sense, we could argue that whilst the problem begins with Descartes, it is not ‘Descartes error’ as such (Damasio 2008:6–8). Rather, it is the error of subsequent interpreters who have relied almost exclusively on a cognitive-rationalist approach to truth and reality that leads to a materialist and intellectualist perspective of all of reality (Smith 2009:60–65).

If we recognise that all of reality cannot be captured in purely empiricist, rationalist, materialist terms, then contributions from contexts that maintain an emphasis on the social, the spiritual and the sacred aspects (such as some African philosophical and religious contributions) can serve as an important corrective (Mbiti 1990:229; Mndende 2019:157–154).

A second area in which African contributions offer valuable insights into the debate of individual conscious identity relates to notions of human relational systems. In his 1953 Gifford Lectures, entitled, *The self as agent*, John Macmurray pointed out that the West was facing a ‘crisis of the personal’ (Macmurray 1953):

Modern philosophy is characteristically *egocentric*. I mean no more than this: that firstly, it takes the Self as its starting point, and not God, or the world or community; and that, secondly, the Self is an individual in isolation, an ego or ‘I’, never a ‘thou’. This is shown by the fact that there can arise the question, ‘How does the Self know that other selves exist?’. Further, the Self so premised is a thinker in search of knowledge. It is conceived as Subject; the correlated experience of the object presented for cognition. (p. 31)

Balcomb expanded on this notion by claiming that understandings of being human (which includes both identity and consciousness) are ‘comprehensible only in terms of dynamic social reference. In other words the idea of the isolated, purely individual Self, is fiction’ (Balcomb 2004:63).

Recent global crises in nature (the environmental crises), health (the COVID-19 pandemic) and geo-politics (e.g. Afghanistan and the United States of America, and global political and economic migrations), have shown us how important it is to maintain a view of human persons as socially inter-connected beings. This interconnectedness is

not only between persons and other persons, but also between persons and the rest of the created order. It can no longer be denied that what happens in Wuhan will have consequences for Washington and Cape Town. Inter-objective approaches to identity can provide important insights into social behaviours and their consequences for our explanations and understandings of our shared humanity. Yet, to more fully understand our shared 'humanness', we need more than just inter-objective observations; we need to develop a keen awareness of our inter-subjectivity (beliefs, histories, traumas etc.). This observation is important to understanding the further value that African thought can offer to debates on consciousness and identity. They are predicated upon an understanding of relational ontology (Forster 2010b:243–253; Pally 2019:1–11). Any view of identity that is grounded largely in notions of the self in isolation from others, will have some significant shortcomings. The self:

[I]s part of the world in which it acts, and in dynamic relation with the rest of the world.... To be part of the world is to exist, whilst to be excluded from the world is to be non-existent. (Macmurray 1953:91)

In some African philosophies, the notion of understanding the self in relation to the world is much less a self-objectification of reality by the individual subject.

Balcomb suggested that there are at least three areas in which an African worldview differs from that which emerged from Cartesian thinking. Firstly, there is a fundamental unity between the subject and the object in the African worldview. This translates into a worldview that maintains a unity between the observer and the observed, between God and the world, between the knower and the known, 'and with this, the interconnectedness of all being' (Balcomb 2004:69). Secondly, human beings have a posture of openness, engagement and vulnerability towards the world as we are part of it, and not merely objective observers of it. Thirdly, this creates the possibility of belief in a 'personal universe', yet maintains a sense of social solidarity and mutual responsibility (Balcomb 2004:69). We are persons because we exist within the nested reality creation.

Taylor (1975) described the unity between the subject and object in some African thought in the following manner:

[N]ot only is there less separation between subject and object, between self and not-self, but fundamentally, all things share the same nature and the same interaction one upon another – rocks and forest, beasts and serpents, the power of the wind and waves upon a ship, the power of a drum over a dancer's body, the power in the mysterious caves of Kokola, the living, the dead and the first ancestors, from the stone to the divinities and hierarchy of power but not of being, for all are one, all are here, all are now. (p. 64)

This perspective highlights at least three areas in which an African focus on inter-subjectivity could be valuable and necessary for debates on identity and consciousness. Firstly, it reminds us of ways of understanding human 'being'. To be human is to be in relationship. In this regard, it provides a

vocabulary that is steeped in interconnectedness, ontological solidarity and shared humanity. African understandings of self, society and the cosmos enrich debate and scholarship on identity by showing us that diversity does not equate to difference. These contributions remind us that ontological interconnectedness is foundational to human reality – 'I am because we are' (Forster 2010b:243–253). Secondly, an African contribution has a historical and ontological perspective that approaches problems of relation and identity from a refreshingly different standpoint than those that have emerged from contemporary Western thought. This is not a value judgement; it is simply a recognition of difference and the value that a diversity of perspectives brings to the debate and our understanding of who we are and how we relate to one another. Approaches which are steeped in an African view of reality offer novel insights into the complexity of human being as a self in relation to other beings, indeed all of the cosmos (Forster 2010b:248–249). In post-colonial Africa, there has been a renewal of interest in, and appreciation for, the contribution that African thought and its underlying approach and methodology can bring to global concerns and problems (Mndende 2019:157–174). Thirdly, and perhaps the most pragmatic reason why an African approach is both valuable and necessary, is quite simply because other approaches have not yet been able to present conclusive or satisfactory answers to the complexities of explaining and understanding identity and consciousness. Hence, all contributions that can further the debate, texture our discussions and develop further insight are valuable and necessary.

In his 2010 article, Forster used the term an 'integrated-model of consciousness' to describe such approaches to identity (Forster 2010a:1). An 'integrative framework for individual consciousness', he contended, 'is not static' but is, 'formulated in the process of mutual discovery that arises from a shared journey... that can be found in African philosophy' (Forster 2010a:1). Of course, this is not the only philosophical framework in which an integrated model of consciousness is found. Neither is it argued that this approach presents a comprehensive superior contribution to integrated models of consciousness. However, it does offer some further insights to the debate. Despite all of the above, the African contribution has not yet been considered with adequate rigour and care. As noted, this is sometimes because it is not regarded 'scientific' or sufficiently objective (in an empiricist sense). Scientific rigour and empiricism are both characteristics of post-enlightenment Western materialist worldviews. Some regard them as foundational, whilst contextually grounded views (such as an African worldview) are disregarded as non-foundational. This is a mistake, as has been argued above. African contributions are capable of meeting the standards of scientific rigour whilst offering post-foundational contributions without being disregarded in the broader debates for being supposedly non-foundational.

It is with this in mind that we will present some salient and necessary elements of an African approach to

integrated model of consciousness and identity in the section that follows.

Relating an African worldview to an integrated model of consciousness – A post-foundationalist contribution

Up to now, we have argued that within the context of current debates on identity and consciousness, an African contribution can address, possibly even remedy, some of the dualisms that have been introduced between the self and others, the self and the rest of non-human creation that is common in some Western approaches to identity. The central contention of the argument so far has been that a more integrated approach to identity and consciousness could benefit from an African contribution as a post-foundationalist approach.

Integrated identity, referred to as ‘inter-subjective ontology’, is characteristic of some African approaches to identity and consciousness (Forster 2010b:243–253). An African notion of integrated identity or inter-subjective ontology is ‘an identity claim that comes closer to the truth of who one is’, as it:

[M]ust take cognisance of the interior and exterior life, it must heed individual and social characteristics [of life] and it must be based on an understanding of its wholeness within the context of both higher and lower levels of consciousness. (Forster 2010a:6)

Placide Tempels, a Belgian philosopher from the Congo, made a similar claim saying that ‘separate beings which find themselves side by side, entirely independent of one another, is foreign to Bantu thought’ (Tempels 2010:58). Furthermore, he suggested that African philosophies hold that:

[C]reated beings preserve a bond one of another, an intimate ontological relationship, comparable with the causal tie which binds creature and Creator. For the Bantu there is interaction of being with being, that is to say, of force with force. Transcending the mechanical, chemical and psychological interactions, they see a relationship of forces which we should call ontological. (Tempels 2010:58)

Whilst Balcomb noted that some subsequent African philosophers have taken issue with Tempels’ equation of ‘being’ and ‘force’, few have taken issue with the central assertion of his argument. Namely, that ‘African ontology valorises the interconnectedness of all being’ (Balcomb 2004:70).

It was Descartes’ radical ‘doubt’ that led him to the point of doubting everything, except the self who was doubting (or thinking) (Broughton 2009:2–9). This shifted the emphasis of consciousness to the thinking (doubting) self. Hence, his famous dictum ‘I think therefore I am’ (*cogito ergo sum*) (Broughton 2009:109). According to Mcunu, this led Descartes to inadvertently reduce ‘the human person to a thinking mechanism and the body was seen as a separate substance from the mind’ (Mcunu 2004:24). The introduction of a dualism between the body and the mind led to a separation

of the self from human, and non-human, others. It introduced a radical subjective or objective relationship between the thinking self and the objective world. This became a characteristic of much of Western philosophy and science, and permeated enlightenment and later modernist thinking about reality in the West, and thought that spread from the West. However, the same cannot be said for much of African thought.

Alexis Kagame, the Franco-African philosopher, set out to evaluate Tempels’ contention of African ontological inter-subjectivity by means of linguistic analysis. In, *La Philosophie Bantu Rwandaise de l’Etre*, he analysed the term *ntu* that can be roughly translated as ‘being’ (eds. Bujo & Muya 2005:17–18; Kagame 1966:52–55; Kimenyi 1980:16). Mudimbe, a Congolese philosopher, developed Kagame’s seminal work in linguistics in his African philosophy, concluding that ‘the Bantu equivalent of *to be* is strictly and only performed as a copula. It does not express the notion of existence, and therefore cannot translate the Cartesian *cogito*’ (Mudimbe 1985:189). Thus, Balcomb noted ‘the essence of African ontology, usually adumbrated in the expression “I am because others are, and because others are I am”, is diametrically opposed to the Cartesian schema’ (Balcomb 2004:71). This is how Mudimbe (1985) analysed the root word, *ntu*, as an African expression of ontological being:

In sum, the *ntu* is somehow a sign of a universal similitude. Its presence in beings brings them to life and attests to both their individual value and to the measure of their integration and dialectic of vital energy. *Ntu* is both a uniting and a differentiating vital norm, which explains the powers of vital inequality in terms of difference between beings. It is a sign that God, father [*sic*] of all beings ... has put a stamp on the universe, thus making it transparent in a hierarchy of sympathy. Upwards, one would read the vitality which, from minerals through vegetables, animals and humans, links stones to the departed and God himself. Downwards, it is a genealogical filiation of forms of beings, engendering or relating to one another, all of them witnessing to the original source that made them possible. (pp. 189–190)

A reflection on this claim shows just how different it is in both substance and form from the radical individualism, spiritual disenchantment and mechanistic worldview that has come to characterise so much of the contemporary debates around human identity and consciousness. It is neither entirely objective (a claim of foundationalist certitude), nor radically subjective (a non-foundationalist claim subject to relativity). Mudimbe’s analysis highlights an important point in relation to our argument for a post-foundationalist contribution from an African perspective. There is a clear emphasis on the interconnectedness of all of reality – human to human, human to non-human, with all of these connections existing within the ambit of connection to the divine. The truest self, and best explanations of the self, cannot be fully expressed only in either vague universal terms, or expressly particular terms. Rather, the self, *ntu*, is ‘both a uniting and a differentiating vital norm’ which ‘attests

to both their individual value and to the measure of their integration and dialectic of vital energy' (Mudimbe 1985:189). The self is thus not merely an isolated subject nor a lone object. Rather the individual self emerges in the midst of inter-subjective and inter-objective 'vital energy' with the supposed other (whether that be a human, non-human or divine 'other'). In a post-foundationalist sense, Balcomb (2004) wrote that:

[T]he interconnectedness of the universe, beginning with the creator and going all the way down to rocks, can surely not be more strongly stated. Here is a system that is indeed a Cartesian nightmare and a Whiteheadian dream. (p. 71)

In terms of identity and consciousness, the integral unity between the self and the supposed other, the self and the entire Universe, is an important emphasis for both 'explanatory power and truth', which necessarily relies on the richness of religious beliefs and scientific study (Van Huyssteen 1997:163). Because some contemporary Western scientific and theological views on identity and consciousness have fallen into the error of creating a false dualism between religious belief and scientific knowledge, or believing that neither of these approaches has any worth for the other, an African post-foundationalist contribution is of some value as it relates to both. Edwards speaks of such an approach as an 'integrated approach' to identity, because it draws upon insights from the interior life and the exterior life, the individual's reality and the reality of groups (Edwards 1998:99).

According to Edwards, there are three principal ways in which an African worldview correlates with post-foundationalist approaches to consciousness and identity which draw upon subjective, objective, inter-objective and inter-subjective realities (Edwards 1998:99–100).

Firstly, African integrated approaches and post-foundational approaches share an understanding that 'existence is multidimensional and a dynamic process' (Edwards 1998:99; Forster 2010a:6). In other words, we cannot know or explain reality without a reference to the multiple dimensions of existence (individual, collective, the interior life and the exterior world). Moreover, all explanations of reality and so, by extension all understandings of identity and consciousness, are dynamic. They are dynamic in relation to their constituent elements of knowledge (e.g. beliefs are linked to histories, gender identity, culture, race, etc.) Moreover, these elements are always in a process of dynamic interchange in the construction of individual identities, as well as the construction of shared identities.

Secondly, what persons experience as the 'phenomenal world' is 'a continuously unfolding expression of a deeper subtler, yet equally real, form of reality' (Edwards 1998:99; Forster 2010a:6). African concepts of reality are frequently constructed in relation to sensory, non-sensory and super-sensory realities. This serves as both an aggregate, and even as a corrective, to a westernised 'mono-dimensional, materialistic world-view' (Edwards 1998:95).

Thirdly, according to Edwards, to exist is to be situated within a series of 'nested holarchies' (Edwards 1998:95; Wilber 1996:99). Forster (2019) explained the notion of belonging in relation to nested holarchies that Edwards referred to as:

[T]he fundamental interdependence of the elements in both ascending and descending order. Higher orders are fundamentally dependent on the inclusion of lower orders. The value of a higher order is found in the value of the lower orders. For example, one cannot have a moving poem without sentences, and sentences themselves require words, and one cannot have words without the letters of the alphabet. The sequencing of lower orders to higher orders is an indispensable aspect of the Holarchy. Each holon is both part and whole at the same time. The poem, as a whole, cannot exist without the words. Yet, the words cannot convey the meaning of the poem without being included into its poetic and expressive structure. (p. 33)

In other words, higher levels of a holarchy transcend and include lower levels, and there is 'mutual inter-penetration of all entities within each level' (Forster 2010a:7). An African worldview that emphasises 'being-human-together' takes account of various levels of consciousness (i.e. from the most basic forms of consciousness, such as individual consciousness, to the most subtle levels of consciousness, such as spiritual and pluri-dimensional consciousness) (Edwards 1998:95).

Thus, an African contribution to identity and consciousness helps us to explain and understand the subtleties of our individual and shared identities more adequately as they are formed in relation to our conscious belonging in the world, our memories, our beliefs and our lived reality. In summary, an African worldview emphasises the 'wholeness of all being' in the construction of identity and consciousness (Setiloane 1998:75). In a post-foundationalist sense, such a view is subjective, objective, inter-subjective and inter-objective in nature. It cannot be reduced to either foundational knowledge or non-foundational experience. True identity and consciousness is, thus, 'person- and situation-relative', with some measure of 'universal intent' as it draws upon 'the heuristic structures of different disciplines' (Van Huyssteen 1997:155, 172). It charts a third way between differing notions concerning human identity and consciousness, seeking to provide the truest understanding and best explanations of reality by drawing upon insights gleaned from a variety of hitherto separated sources. Such 'transversal rationality' 'facilitates a multi-perspectival approach to dialogue' across a variety of disciplines and approaches to truth and knowledge (Van Huyssteen 2006:20). A post-foundational approach rightly encourages transversal connections between varying traditions of knowledge in the interests of greater truth and more adequate explanation.

Conclusion

This article argued that an African theological approach to consciousness and identity is a necessary contribution to contemporary debates in the field. It proposes that approaches, such as the one advocated for here, are post-foundational. Firstly, we explained why this approach, which

is classified as a 'generous ontology', was relatable to the post-foundational theology of Wentzel van Huyssteen. It was felt to be important because the concept emerged from an interaction between the author and Prof. Van Huyssteen that set off a research journey for the next number of decades. Having explained this link, we spent some time considering how best one would go about explaining and understanding notions of identity and consciousness. It was concluded that the notion of a 'generous ontology' was well suited to this task since it emerges from an 'integrated approach' to identity that emerges from subjective, objective, inter-subjective and inter-objective understandings of reality. Next, it was argued that one could credibly speak of the notion of African thought in some carefully delimited sense. Thereafter, we considered why this approach has been disregarded amongst some westernised approaches to science and theology. Finally, we concluded with a discussion on how an African contribution to consciousness and identity, as a post-foundationalist approach, could enrich our growing understanding of the complex phenomena of identity and consciousness.

It is hoped that this article honours the important contribution of Prof. Wentzel van Huyssteen to debates on science and theology. His personal studies and work have been of immense importance for the author of this article. Moreover, the article wished to show how his post-foundational theology allowed for the inclusion of African theological approaches to a 'generous ontology' in our explanations and understandings of an integrated approach to studies in identity and consciousness.

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D.A.F. is the sole author of this article.

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