

**Bantu Ontology of Vital Forces and Moral Development in Generation Z World: A
Tempelsian Intervention**

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Abstract

This study explores the contemporary relevance of Placide Tempel's interpretation of the Bantu ontology of vital forces for shaping the moral development of Generation Z in a rapidly transforming global context. The moral landscape of today's youth is increasingly defined by digital technologies, fluid identities and weakened communal bonds—conditions that expose the limitations of dominant Western moral paradigms grounded in individualism and procedural rationality. Through philosophical analysis, this work argues that Tempels' claim that "being is force, and force is being" offers a life-centered ethical framework capable of addressing these moral dislocations. The ontology of vital forces shifts the ethical focus from rule-based prescriptions to actions that enhance or diminish life within a relational and communal web. This perspective resonates with Generation Z's emerging concerns for social justice, inclusivity, mental well-being and ecological sustainability, while also offering a corrective against tendencies toward moral relativism, hyper-individualism and digitally mediated superficial engagements. Drawing on African philosophical resources, especially those that emphasize relational personhood and communal interdependence, the study proposes that a Tempelsian ethic can provide Generation Z with a morally grounding horizon that affirms autonomy without severing it from communal responsibility. The study concludes that integrating the ontology of vital forces into moral education and youth development can enrich contemporary ethical discourse by fostering a generation oriented toward the flourishing of the self, the community and the environment.

Keywords: Bantu ontology, vital force, Tempel's, Generation Z, moral development.

Introduction

Moral uncertainty within Generation Z has become increasingly pronounced in a world shaped by digital hyperconnectivity, rapid globalization and shifting cultural norms. As traditional moral frameworks lose their binding force, young people often struggle to negotiate the tension between

personal autonomy and communal responsibility. Giddens' (1996) observation that modernity "disembeds social relations" (p. 28) captures the lived experience of many members of this generation who find themselves navigating fragmented moral horizons with limited grounding.

These developments invite a return to African philosophical traditions that conceive morality not as abstract rule-following, but as the enhancement of life within a relational community. Placide Tempels' influential articulation of the Bantu ontology of vital forces provides a compelling framework for such a return. His assertion that "being is force, and force is being" (2010, p. 43) situates moral action within a metaphysical vision where existence is dynamic and relational. Within this ontology, actions are evaluated according to their capacity to increase or diminish the vitality of persons and communities. For Generation Z—whose moral choices increasingly occur in digital spaces where consequences often seem distant or obscured—this life-centered orientation offers a concrete reminder that moral agency is inseparable from its effects on others. Mbiti's (1999) dictum, "I am because we are" (p. 141), further deepens this insight by situating the self within a network of communal belonging.

The aim of this study is therefore constructive: to demonstrate how Tempels' interpretation of Bantu vital force ontology can serve as a meaningful philosophical resource for addressing the moral dilemmas of contemporary youth. Scholars such as Gyekye (1997) have shown that African moral thought remains salient in modern ethical discourse precisely because of its emphasis on the social character of personhood. In contrast, Western individualism—while expanding personal freedoms—often contributes to fragmented commitments and the erosion of communal obligations. Bauman's (2006) notion of "liquid modernity" (p. 59) captures this erosion vividly. By employing philosophical analysis, this study argues that the ontology of vital forces offers a robust grounding for moral development that speaks to Generation Z's concerns for justice, inclusivity and sustainability while counteracting moral fragmentation. It proposes that integrating a Tempelsian ethic into contemporary moral formation can nurture a generation that is both self-directed and communally responsible, ultimately fostering the flourishing of individuals, communities and the broader ecological order.

Placide Tempels and the Bantu Ontology of Vital Forces

Placide Tempels remains one of the earliest scholars to systematically articulate the metaphysical foundations of African thought through his influential book *Bantu Philosophy*. Writing as a Belgian missionary in the Congo during the mid-20th century, Tempels believed that the key to understanding Bantu ontology lies in the category of vital force. According to him, in Bantu metaphysics, "being is force and force is being" (Tempels, 2010, p. 43). This striking formulation reflects the belief that existence itself is not static substance but dynamic vitality. For the Bantu, everything that exists, whether divine, human, animal or material, participates in this

universal life-force. The moral life, therefore, consists in preserving, increasing and harmonizing these forces in a way that strengthens the community and sustains the order of existence.

Tempels explained that the Bantu conceive reality as hierarchically ordered, with God or the Supreme Being at the apex as the source of all life. Below God are the ancestors, who mediate spiritual vitality, followed by living human beings, animals, plants and inanimate objects, each possessing different degrees of force. In this scheme, moral action is judged according to whether it enhances or diminishes life-force. Tempels (2010) observes that “the supreme good consists in the increase of vital force; evil consists in its diminution” (Tempels, 2010, p. 46). This understanding stands in contrast to Western metaphysical categories of substance and accident, suggesting instead a relational ontology where life itself is the fundamental category.

The originality of Tempels’ thesis lies in how it gives systematic philosophical language to African categories of thought, even though critics have debated the accuracy of his interpretation. Still, scholars have acknowledged that the notion of vital force captures something central to African worldviews. Mbiti (1999) affirms this when he writes that “the concept of vital force runs through African ontology like a golden thread” (p. 93). He further explains that human beings are seen not as isolated individuals but as nodes within a web of life, always connected to the community, the ancestors and the natural world.

One of the key implications of Tempels’ analysis is that morality in the Bantu worldview is inseparable from ontology. Ethical conduct is not an external code imposed on individuals but an intrinsic part of being. Every action has metaphysical significance because it either strengthens or weakens life. Gyekye (1997) supports this perspective when he notes that “the moral life of the African is inextricably linked to the metaphysical conception of life as force” (p. 42). This means that to act immorally is not only to harm another person but also to upset the balance of existence itself. Furthermore, the Bantu ontology of vital forces emphasizes community over individuality. The self is understood primarily in relation to others and vitality increases through harmonious social relations. Tempels (2010) explains that “the good of the individual is the good of the community and the good of the community is the good of the individual” (p. 54). This resonates with Mbiti’s oft-cited dictum, “I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am” (1999, p. 141). Such a view challenges modern tendencies towards excessive individualism, suggesting instead that true flourishing comes through participation in the life of others.

Another important aspect of Tempels’ account is the role of ancestors. Ancestors are not merely remembered but are active participants in the vital economy of existence. They serve as mediators of divine force and protectors of the community. To neglect them or to break the moral codes they uphold is to weaken the flow of vitality into the community. Magesa (1997) emphasizes this when he notes that “the moral traditions of Africa are essentially life-centered, grounded in the imperative to preserve life through respect for God, the ancestors, and the community” (p. 37).

This highlights the continuity between metaphysical and ethical dimensions of African thought. Tempels' contribution can also be seen as a critique of Western categories imposed on African societies. Whereas Western metaphysics has long privileged notions such as substance, matter or essence, Tempels demonstrated that African categories are different but no less philosophical. He insisted that "the Bantu live by a philosophy which has its own system, its own categories, its own unity" (Tempels, 2010, p. 29). This recognition opened the way for African philosophy to be taken seriously in academic discourse, even if later scholars criticized aspects of his approach as paternalistic or too missionary-driven.

The relevance of Tempels' ontology of vital forces extends beyond the historical and philosophical. In today's context, where moral fragmentation and ecological crisis threaten both human and non-human life, the idea of life as an interconnected force provides a timely corrective. It challenges modern generations to rethink morality as the preservation and enhancement of vitality, not only for individuals but for communities and ecosystems. Asouzu (2007) argues that "the African idea of being as force provides an integrative horizon for overcoming the dichotomies of modern thought" (p. 61). Thus, Tempels' intervention continues to be meaningful in discussions on ethics, ecology and human development.

Therefore, Placide Tempels' articulation of the Bantu ontology of vital forces presents a metaphysical system where existence is defined by vitality, morality is grounded in life-preservation and community constitutes the core of personhood. Though debated and sometimes critiqued, his work has had enduring significance in bringing African thought into philosophical recognition. The idea that "being is force" (Tempels, 2010, p. 43) not only captures the heart of Bantu metaphysics but also opens possibilities for moral reflection in contemporary contexts, particularly for younger generations seeking ethical grounding in a fragmented world.

Moral Development in the Context of Generation Z

The moral development of Generation Z presents both unique opportunities and serious challenges in the contemporary world. Born roughly between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, this generation has grown up in a world shaped by digital technology, globalization and fluid cultural identities. Their moral outlook cannot be separated from the unprecedented access to information, social media influence and the weakening of traditional structures of authority. Twenge (2017) observes that "no generation has been more exposed to technology at such an early age, with profound effects on their values, relationships and sense of self" (p. 21). This exposure has given Generation Z remarkable adaptability and awareness but it has also left them vulnerable to moral fragmentation and relativism.

One defining feature of Generation Z's moral development is the emphasis on personal autonomy and self-expression. Unlike earlier generations, whose moral codes were largely shaped by religious institutions or cultural traditions, Gen Z tends to prioritize authenticity and personal

choice. According to Smith & Admaczyk (2021), “young people today tend to approach morality as a matter of individual decision-making, without appeal to external authorities” (p. 58). This orientation, while promoting freedom and creativity, often results in the erosion of stable moral anchors. The challenge, therefore, is to understand how moral growth can occur within a context where traditional sources of ethical guidance carry less authority.

Another factor influencing the moral development of this generation is the rise of digital culture. Social media platforms not only shape relationships but also create new moral spaces where issues of justice, identity and responsibility are constantly negotiated. Gardner and Davis (2013) describe this as the “app generation,” where “young people’s values and worldviews are profoundly shaped by the digital apps they use” (p. 12). This environment fosters a heightened awareness of global issues such as climate change, racial justice and gender equality but it also encourages superficial involvements and performative morality. The result is that moral commitments can become situational, shaped by online trends rather than deeply rooted ethical convictions.

The weakening of communal bonds further complicates the moral growth of Generation Z. Bauman (2006) has described contemporary life as “liquid modernity” (p. 59) where relationships and commitments are fragile and transient. This reality is evident among young people, who navigate shifting social networks with little long-term stability. Without strong communal frameworks, moral values risk being reduced to individual preferences. Yet, as research in moral psychology has shown, community plays an essential role in shaping virtues such as empathy, responsibility and justice. Haidt (2013) argues that “morality binds and blinds, creating communities of trust and cooperation” (p. 56). For Generation Z, the absence of such binding moral communities leaves a significant gap in their moral development.

Despite these challenges, Generation Z also exhibits strong moral potential. Many members of this generation are deeply concerned with justice, inclusivity and environmental responsibility. Their activism around issues such as climate change and human rights suggests a moral orientation toward global solidarity. Seemiller and Grace (2019) note that “Gen Z students are motivated by values of fairness, equality and sustainability, seeking to make a difference in the world” (p. 77). This indicates that, while traditional frameworks may be less influential, new moral commitments are emerging that align with concerns about the future of humanity and the planet.

However, the risk of moral relativism remains ever-present. The constant exposure to diverse cultural values online can create confusion about the nature of right and wrong. Taylor (2007) explains that modern pluralism leads to “the fragility of moral horizons” (p. 475) where individuals lack firm convictions about ethical norms. For Generation Z, this fragility manifests in the difficulty of sustaining consistent moral commitments amid competing influences. It is here that philosophical and cultural resources such as the African ontology of vital forces, may provide

an alternative grounding for moral development. The educational and developmental implications of this situation are significant. Scholars in youth studies emphasize that moral education for Generation Z must move beyond rigid codes and instead cultivate critical reflection, empathy and relational responsibility. Noddings (2013) highlights the importance of care ethics, arguing that “moral education must center on the relational self, for it is through caring relationships that moral development takes place” (p. 89). This relational orientation resonates with African communal philosophies and could provide a bridge between indigenous wisdom and contemporary youth realities.

Thus, the moral development of Generation Z is marked by a tension between autonomy and community, freedom and responsibility, digital engagement and moral depth. While this generation shows remarkable sensitivity to global justice and inclusivity, they lack stable moral frameworks to sustain these commitments. Their context requires a moral grounding that speaks both to their individuality and their interconnectedness. As Giddens (1996) reminds us that “in conditions of modernity, the self becomes a reflexive project” (p. 32). For Generation Z, this project of the self must be accompanied by a vision of moral life that emphasizes life-enhancement and communal responsibility, a perspective that the Bantu ontology of vital forces, as interpreted by Tempels, is well-suited to provide.

Intersections of Tempelsian Thought and Gen Z Moral Experiences

The intersection of Placide Tempels’ interpretation of Bantu ontology with the moral experiences of Generation Z provides a meaningful way to rethink how traditional African categories of thought can engage contemporary ethical challenges. Tempels (2010) emphasized that in Bantu philosophy “the supreme good consists in the increase of vital force; evil consists in its diminution” (p. 46). This principle resonates deeply with the experiences of Generation Z, a cohort navigating fragmented moral frameworks shaped by digital culture, globalization and individualism. The ethical question for today’s youth is no longer merely about obedience to rules but about whether their actions promote flourishing, of themselves, others and the wider community.

Generation Z’s moral experiences are often defined by their consideration of global justice, inclusivity and ecological responsibility. Many of them participate actively in movements for climate action, gender equality and racial justice. These commitments reflect a concern with life in its fullness which Tempels’ ontology describes as the core of morality. Magesa (1997) notes that “the moral traditions of Africa are essentially life-centered, grounded in the imperative to preserve life through respect for God, the ancestors and the community” (p. 37). For Gen Z, this translates into activism that seeks to preserve the planet, challenge oppressive systems and affirm human dignity. In this way, the Tempelsian notion of vital force finds a living expression in their global consciousness.

Yet, the moral struggles of Generation Z also reveal how far their experiences diverge from traditional African communal structures. In Tempels' framework, vitality is nurtured within community and individuality cannot be understood apart from social relations. He writes that "the good of the individual is the good of the community and the good of the community is the good of the individual" (Tempels, 2010, p. 54). By contrast, Gen Z faces the challenge of reconciling their strong sense of individuality with the need for collective responsibility. Social media reinforces this paradox because it provides spaces for activism and solidarity, yet it also fosters self-promotion, consumerism and shallow engagement. The intersection here is therefore not seamless but dialectical, highlighting both affinities and tensions between Tempelsian thought and digital-age morality.

The Bantu ontology of vital forces also sheds light on how Generation Z approaches relationships and identity. In African thought, the human person is a nexus of relationships and moral development is measured by the ability to strengthen bonds that enhance life. Mbiti (1999) captured this idea when he stated, "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am" (p. 141). For Gen Z, identity is increasingly constructed through networks, both physical and digital. Their friendships, communities and even political affiliations emerge in online spaces where relational bonds can be strong yet fragile. The Tempelsian emphasis on interconnectedness suggests that moral growth for Gen Z requires grounding these relationships not in fleeting digital exchanges but in enduring commitments that genuinely enhance life.

Another area of intersection lies in how both Tempels' thought and Gen Z experiences grapple with authority and tradition. For the Bantu, ancestors are vital mediators of moral vitality, ensuring continuity between past and present. Ancestors embody moral wisdom and serve as guardians of communal life. Tempels (2010) argues that "the whole of morality and law is contained in the relationships of forces and it is the ancestors who safeguard the order of these forces" (p. 67). Generation Z, however, resists traditional authority structures, preferring to shape morality through personal autonomy and peer networks. This divergence raises the question of how ancestral wisdom or its equivalent in modern contexts, can be reinterpreted for a generation skeptical of rigid traditions. One possibility is to frame the role of ancestors metaphorically as symbols of heritage, memory and continuity, thereby linking Gen Z's emphasis on innovation with a grounding in enduring values.

The ecological consciousness of Generation Z provides another striking intersection with the Tempelsian worldview. Bantu ontology understands nature not as inactive matter but as a bearer of vitality. Plants, animals and even minerals participate in the hierarchy of forces and contribute to the harmony of existence. Asouzu (2007) highlights that "the African idea of being as force provides an integrative horizon for overcoming the dichotomies of modern thought" (p. 61). Gen Z's concern for environmental justice reflects this integrative orientation as they increasingly advocate for sustainable living, renewable energy and climate action. Their activism mirrors the

African insistence that harming nature diminishes life-force while protecting it ensures collective flourishing.

Nevertheless, Generation Z also experiences challenges that Tempels' ontology could address but does not automatically resolve. One such challenge is moral relativism. Taylor (2007) explains that in pluralist societies, individuals face "the fragility of moral horizons" (p. 475), unsure of what principles to prioritize. For Gen Z, this fragility is amplified by exposure to competing values online. The Tempelsian idea that moral action must always enhance vitality provides a possible standard of evaluation that transcends relativism while remaining adaptable to context. It gives young people a way to assess actions not simply by personal preference but by their contribution to life in community.

The intersections between Tempelsian thought and Gen Z moral experiences, therefore, reveal both harmonies and dissonances. On one hand, the emphasis on life, interconnectedness and community resonates with Gen Z's activism and concern for global justice. On the other hand, tensions arise around issues of individualism, authority and the instability of digital relationships. The meeting point of these traditions suggests that Tempels' ontology of vital forces can serve as a philosophical lens through which Generation Z's moral struggles and aspirations can be understood and guided. By integrating African metaphysical insights with contemporary youth realities, it becomes possible to articulate a moral vision that affirms both personal autonomy and communal vitality.

Concluding Remarks

The intersections between Tempels' ontology of vital forces and the moral experiences of Generation Z point to the possibility of constructing a renewed ethic that is both life-centered and socially responsible. Placide Tempels' claim that "being is force, and force is being" (2010, p. 43) establishes a moral principle where the value of human action is measured by its capacity to enhance vitality. In the context of Generation Z, whose moral struggles are shaped by digital culture, individualism and pluralism, this principle can serve as a corrective against fragmentation and moral relativism.

Generation Z demonstrates a strong concern for justice, equality and ecological sustainability which aligns closely with the Bantu idea that morality is about preserving and increasing life. Magesa (1997) reinforces this by stating that "the moral traditions of Africa are essentially life-centered" (p. 37), suggesting that an ethic grounded in vitality could guide young people toward deeper moral commitments. Such an approach would move beyond rules or subjective preferences, offering instead a relational standard where the flourishing of the individual is inseparable from the flourishing of the community.

The adoption of a vital force ethics for Generation Z also emphasizes responsibility toward the environment and future generations. Mbiti's (1999) assertion that "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am" (p. 141) captures the communal orientation that Gen Z already expresses in global activism but which requires a stronger philosophical foundation. By situating morality within the web of life, Tempels' vision provides a framework that affirms autonomy while grounding it in solidarity. In conclusion, a Tempelsian-inspired ethic of vital forces offers a path toward moral development that speaks directly to the dilemmas of Generation Z. It calls for an education and practice of morality that enhances life, nurtures community, and sustains the vitality of both humanity and nature.

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