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### A Historical and Philosophical Perspective of Social Support Systems

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*Social Support Systems,  
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the Early Christian Social  
Philosophy.*

This manuscript offers a comprehensive analysis of the philosophical and historical dimensions of social support systems, aiming to establish a foundational body of knowledge to guide future research in this domain. By examining various philosophical traditions, the study delves into the evolution of social support concepts, encompassing Greek social philosophy, Roman social philosophy, early Christian thought, and the philosophy of Ubuntu. The manuscript elucidates how these diverse perspectives have shaped contemporary understandings of social support, highlighting both the continuities and transformations over time. Through this historical and philosophical exploration, the paper seeks to provide a robust framework for analyzing and enhancing modern social support systems, ultimately contributing to more informed and effective support structures in contemporary society.

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#### INTRODUCTION

This Article presents a historical and philosophical development of social support systems. It presents

the numerous historical events and structures about the evolution and subsequent development of the concept of social support systems as well as the

cutting edge in the study of social support systems. The chapter starts with an understanding of social philosophy, the broader concept from which social support systems emerged and drives deeper into understanding the more specific concept of social support systems. For a clearer understanding of the historical and philosophical epidemiology, the

researcher presents the period when such evolution occurred, key concepts and ideas during the evolution and the scholars or philosophers behind the evolution of the idea. The main aim is to show what has been done over time in the field of social support systems and the cutting edge for the study.

**Table 1: Summary presentation of the historical and philosophical perspectives**

Philosophy	Philosopher	Philosophical constructs
The Greek Social Philosophy	Plato (427-347 B.C.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- He contended that the ethical foundation of society is reflected in the functional division of labour.</li> <li>- He also believed that individuals can influence their own social relationships and that a collective desire would emerge from shared external conditions and stimuli.</li> </ul>
	Aristotle (384-322 B.C)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- He clearly stated that humans are inherently social beings, highlighting the necessity of social relationships for the full development of one's personality.</li> <li>- Additionally, Aristotle explained social evolution through the lens of utility, asserting that the foundation of society lies in friendship.</li> </ul>
	Zeno (ca.350-ca.260) and Polybius (203-121 B.C.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- They viewed society through the lens of rational thought and agreed with Aristotle that social interaction is essential for individual development and fulfilling responsibilities to others.</li> <li>- They asserted that the establishment of government is crucial for enhancing social relations.</li> <li>- Their focus was primarily on legal matters, aiming to promote political and legal progress.</li> <li>- They also developed a theory of social evolution that included concepts like the struggle for existence, survival of the fittest, and the lifestyles of primitive societies.</li> </ul>
	Lucretius (99-55 B.C.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- They were more of legal minds- focused on advancing political and legal development.</li> <li>- Produced a theory of social evolution. The struggle for existence; the survival of the fittest; the mode of life among primitive peoples etc.</li> </ul>
	Cicero (106-43 B.C.).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- He embraced Aristotle's idea of the natural sociability of humans, rejecting the Epicurean belief that society arises from a feeling of weakness in solitude or a recognition of the benefits of coming together.</li> <li>- He also concurred with Aristotle on the importance of friendship and shared values as the psychological foundation for social connections.</li> </ul>
	Seneca (3 B.c.-65 A.D.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He revitalized the ancient Greek view of primitive society as a golden age, which was succeeded by a time when conventional institutions emerged as a response to the problems that arose and ultimately led to the decline of that golden age.</li> </ul>
The Roman Social System and Philosophy	Lucretius (99-55 BC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Romans were of a legal character rather than constructive speculative philosophy.</li> <li>• He introduced the theory of social evolution.</li> </ul>
	Cicero (106-43 BC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- He acknowledged and highlighted Aristotle's principle regarding the natural sociability of humans.</li> <li>- He stressed the importance of friendship and shared values as the psychological foundation of social connections.</li> </ul>

	Seneca (3 BC to 65 AD)	- It resurrected the Greek idea of a primitive society as a golden age, followed by the emergence of conventional institutions. - Humans existed without coercive authority.
<b>The Early Christian social philosophy</b>	St. Paul initiated the movement, which was carried on by the fathers until, by the fifth century A.D	- Humans are inherently social, making society a natural development, in line with the views of Aristotle and the Stoics. - Seneca's ideal "golden" state of nature, characterized by the absence of coercive governance, was associated with humanity's condition before the "Fall." - The "Fall" made civil government necessary as a response to human crimes and vices. - Although government arose from the "Fall," it was still a divine institution intended to prevent further wrongdoing; thus, rulers received their authority from God, acted as His agents, and rebellion was considered sinful. - While social institutions may have practical value in improving life on Earth, their impact is temporary and far less significant compared to preparing for the institutions of the heavenly kingdom.
The social philosophy of the mediaeval period	Thomas Aquinas Barnes 1917	- It stressed that humans are inherently social beings. - Within society, there exists a shared sense of purpose and interest, as individuals can only fulfil their social needs through relationships with others.
	Dante (1265-1321 AD)	- It emphasized the necessity of a universal monarchy and the significance of aligning authority with the church.
<b>Early Modern Social Philosophy</b>	Machiavelli and Khaldun	- This philosophy highlights how cultural interactions influence social connections (Barnes 1917). - It introduced the idea that human desires are varied and constantly expanding and that fulfilling these needs requires collaboration.
The African Social Philosophy		It outlines the complete African perspective on social support. The main philosophical foundations include:  - Prioritizing society over the individual. - Rational behaviour emphasizes positive human values like love, empathy, kindness, and generosity. - Synergy: Ubuntu asserts that a person's value is determined by social, cultural, and spiritual factors, necessitating active engagement with the community. - Leadership that is organized and focused on serving the people. - The Ubuntu philosophy encourages community members to cultivate care, understanding, and a spirit of sharing.

**The study aimed to;**

- Examine Greek social philosophy's influence on early support system concepts.
- Analyze Roman social philosophy's contributions to the development of support frameworks.
- Explore early Christian thought and its impact on social support mechanisms.

- Investigate the philosophy of Ubuntu and its role in shaping communal support practices.
- Establish a comprehensive foundation for future research on social support systems.

**UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY**

Social philosophy is a branch of philosophy that examines the structures and dynamics of society,

focusing on concepts such as justice, rights, and the nature of social relationships. It seeks to understand how societal institutions influence individual behaviour and how individuals can contribute to the betterment of society. Key figures in this field, such as Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill, and Jean-Paul Sartre, have explored the interplay between individual agency and social constraints, emphasizing that personal identities are shaped by social contexts. According to Giddens (1984), social philosophy helps illuminate the connections between individual actions and broader social patterns, providing insights into how societal norms and values are constructed.

One of the central themes in social philosophy is the notion of social support, which refers to the resources and assistance individuals receive from their social networks. Social support plays a critical role in promoting well-being, as it can enhance emotional resilience, provide practical help, and foster a sense of belonging. The work of scholars like Cohen and Wills (1985) has shown that social support can mitigate the effects of stress, contributing to better physical and mental health outcomes. In this way, social philosophy not only critiques social structures but also emphasizes the importance of supportive relationships in navigating life's challenges.

Furthermore, social philosophy invites us to consider the ethical implications of social support systems. It raises questions about the responsibilities individuals and institutions have to one another in fostering environments where support can thrive. For instance, Sen (1999) argues that justice in society requires addressing inequalities in access to social resources. This perspective encourages a critical examination of how social policies can either enhance or undermine social support, ultimately influencing the quality of life for individuals within a community. By engaging with these philosophical inquiries, we can better understand the complexities of social support and its vital role in building cohesive societies.

## **HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL CONNOTATIONS OF SOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS**

### **The Greek Social Philosophy**

There is not much-recorded history about the period of Greek thought before Plato. However, Hesiod an 18th Century (BC) scholar, Anaximander (610-546 B.C.), Aeschylus (525-456 B.C.) and Theognis (ca. 550 B.C.) Hippocrates (ca. 460-370 B.C.), and Herodotus (d. after 430 B.C.), provided useful insight into the Greek Social philosophy at the time (Barnes 1917). Hippocrates (ca. 460-370 B.C.), in his work on *Airs, Waters, and Places*, presented the first serious analysis of the influence of the physical environment upon human society. He described the effect of climate and topography upon the peoples of Asia regarding political institutions and physical characteristics with accuracy and detail not equalled before. His work constituted the point of departure for all treatments of the influence of the physical environment till the time of Ritter (Barnes & McDonough 1917).

Another great contributor to the development of social philosophy was Plato (427-347 B.C.). In his search for an adequate definition of justice, Plato was led to make an analysis of society and of the state. He outlined the organic theory of society and found not only the economic but also the ethical basis of society to be embodied in the functional division of labour.' In this respect, he contributed what is probably the most satisfactory analysis of the economic foundations of society which is to be found in the works of any writer of antiquity. He recognized the existence and importance of the organization of the social mind. Adopting the premise that man can control his own social relations and that concerted wishes would be the necessary result of similar external surroundings and stimuli, he constructed one of the most complete utopian plans for an ideal society of which history bears any record (Main 1908). This utopia of Plato provided the first comprehensive scheme of eugenics in the history of social or biological

philosophy (Rawlinson 1859) Especially interesting is - Plato's contribution to historical sociology. With almost the perspective of a nineteenth-century evolutionist, he discerned something of the true nature of social evolution and the time requisite for its consummation and presented his own theories on the subject, which were exceedingly accurate for one possessed of his scanty data. Finally, in contrast to his predecessors and many of his successors, Plato tried to comprehend and analyse society as a unity in its entirety (Barnes 1917).

Another very influential contributor to social Philosophy at the time was Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), His works are accorded a high level of greatness both on account of the profundity of his insight into social processes, and because of his peculiar relation to mediaeval thought, Firstly, he introduced the inductive method of studying social phenomena, while Plato had relied almost entirely upon the far less scientific deductive line of approach. But probably more important than this was his direct and clean-cut assertion that man is by nature a social being (Main, 1908). As a deduction from this dogma of man's inherent sociability, he pointed out the necessity of social relations for the complete development of the human personality and made plain the abnormality of the non-social being (Rawlinson et al., 1859).

Aristotle presented an explanation of social evolution in terms of utility, an expansion of the social nature, and the scope of the desire for, and need of, society. In this respect, he made a considerable advance over Plato, who had adopted the utilitarian and economic explanation, almost to the exclusion of the instinctive basis (Barnes, 1917). However, while Aristotle's interpretation was more inclusive and well-balanced, he fell far short of the thoroughness of Plato in his analysis of the economic foundations of society. The subjective basis of society Aristotle believed to be embodied in friendship, in the analysis of which he approached Professor Giddings' theory of the "consciousness of kind." Finally, Aristotle gave a

more complete statement than Plato of the organic analogy and of the influence of the physical environment upon society. In his theory of the effect of the physical environment, Aristotle revived and adapted the theories of Hippocrates, to furnish a geographical basis for the alleged superiority of the Greeks. He held that by their intermediate geographical situation, the Greeks were able to combine the superior mental attainments of southern peoples with the greater bravery of the northerners (Rawlinson, 1859),

The Stoics, who constituted that school of philosophy founded by Zeno (ca.350-ca.260 B.C.) in the latter half of the fourth century B.C., interpreted society in terms of rational thought and held with Aristotle that all men must be social, both for the development of their own personality and for the proper discharge of their duties toward their fellow-beings. Their conception of society was far broader than that of the other, schools of Greek philosophy, to whom the world was either Greek or barbarian, and the cosmopolitan Stoic conception of a world- society and citizenship did much to develop the idea of the essential brotherhood of mankind. Especially important in their ethical doctrines was their emphasis on the law of nature as the proper guide for moral conduct (Barnes, 1917).

Polybius (203-121 B.C.) is one of the most important figures in the development of that subject. His conception of social evolution was in the main accurate. He premised the aggregation and association of primitive men as resulting from a sense of weakness and a perception of likeness. Government, he believed, arose in force, and was rendered permanent by the increasing reflective action of the social mind as it gradually perceived more clearly the utility of political relations.' This was the argument advanced by Hume nineteen centuries later in his assault upon the doctrine of a social contract (Rollin 1826). Polybius also made an important contribution in assigning the origin of morality and justice to the group's approval or



disapproval of certain practices and modes of conduct (Cramer 1826).

In this, he suggested a line of treatment exploited by writers like Bagehot and Sumner. Polybius put forth the first clear statement of the theory of reflective sympathy later developed by Spinoza, Hume, and Adam Smith (Cramer, 1826). Again, he was the first writer on political science who proposed to secure liberty and governmental stability through a system of checks and balances in political organization (Denholm, 1937) Finally, Polybius presented one of the clearest statements of the prevalent classical conception of the cyclical nature of the historical process-a view taken up by Machiavelli and recently revived by Le Bon and Gumplowicz (Bury, 1900).

### **The Roman Social System and Philosophy**

The Roman social system and philosophy were unique from the Greek as they primarily focused on legal and practical matters rather than speculative philosophy. Consequently, their contributions centred on enhancing political organization and legal systems rather than developing theories about the state and society (Williams & Harrison, 1981). As they built their empire, the Romans encountered various legal codes, and this rich "cultural exchange" prompted them to theorize about the origins and nature of laws. Lucretius (99-55 BC), a notable figure of the Epicurean school, played a key role in this discourse (Barnes, 1917). By correlating contemporary accounts of primitive customs with earlier philosophical theories, he formulated a theory of social evolution. His work addressed survival, the struggle for existence, the lifestyle of primitive societies, the origins of language and culture, and the development of trade, presenting these ideas with remarkable clarity and relevance that precluded later interpretations that were not originally his (Barnes, 1917).

Another important contributor to social philosophy was Cicero (106-43 BC). He attempted to depict an ideal commonwealth, following Plato's lead, but he

believed that the Roman commonwealth already embodied the essential traits of a perfect state (Barnes, 1917). Unlike the Epicureans, Cicero accepted Aristotle's view of humans as naturally social beings, emphasizing the benefits of social life without suggesting they were the primary cause of society. He also recognized the importance of friendship and shared values as psychological foundations for social connections. Cicero integrated various contemporary social theories into a cohesive framework, advocating for the brotherhood of humanity and the significance of checks and balances in governance (Hankins, 2009).

Seneca (3 BC-65 AD) introduced a new perspective on social philosophy, contrasting with Cicero by reviving the ancient Greek idea of a primitive "golden age" that later gave way to societal institutions created to address emerging issues (Bury, 1900). In this idyllic phase, humanity lived without coercion, following wise leaders and lacking distinctions in property or social class. The rise of private property, however, led to dissatisfaction with communal ownership and a subsequent desire for wealth and power, necessitating political authority to manage these growing issues. Early Christian thinkers likened his views to humanity's state before the "Fall," reinforcing a retrospective approach to Christian social philosophy that hindered dynamic notions of human progress (Gierke, 1900).

A significant philosophical evolution among the Romans was Neo-Platonism, which combined ideas of a lost golden age with eschatological views, influenced by both pagan and Christian traditions. This synthesis fostered a rich intellectual climate that contributed to the development of Christian theology and social philosophy (Skinner, 2002). In their writings, Julius Caesar and Tacitus made groundbreaking contributions to descriptive sociology and ethnology, offering insights that remained influential until modern ethnological research (Harnack, 1930). Additionally, Cicero and Vitruvius adapted Hippocrates and Aristotle's

environmental theories, arguing that Rome's location was divinely favoured. This notion of the superiority of people in temperate regions continued through the Middle Ages in the works of figures like Vegetius, Paul the Deacon, Aquinas, and Ibn Khaldun, and was systematically explored in Bodin's *République* (Barnes, 1917).

Lastly, the contributions of Roman lawyers regarding political authority are noteworthy. Scholarly consensus indicates that between the second and sixth centuries A.D., a prevailing legal theory asserted that political authority was fundamentally based on popular consent (Harris, 1990; Harnack, 1930). Although emperors often rose to power through questionable means, the idea of consent remained central to political legitimacy. This concept significantly influenced later theories of the social contract and popular sovereignty (Barker, 1946), establishing that political legitimacy derived from the will of the people.

### **The Early Christian social philosophy**

Although the founders of Christianity shared a core belief with the Stoics about the universal brotherhood of humanity under the spirit of God, early Christian social philosophy diverged significantly from Stoicism. This divergence lay in Christianity's more universal and democratic approach, which sought to include all of humanity rather than focusing exclusively on the "wise," as the Stoics did (Barnes 1917). Christianity broke down the hierarchical distinction between the wise and the ignorant, promoting the idea that universal brotherhood could be achieved through faith and belief, rather than solely through rational thought (Boissier, 1906).

The teachings of Jesus emphasized ideals such as love, service, and recognition of human kinship. These principles were presented in an idealistic and flexible manner, designed to adapt to the changing conditions of society rather than being confined to rigid doctrines or rituals (Boissier, 1906). However, as these lofty ideals were applied within the

organized church, they inevitably faced the constraints of dogma and ritualism. Over time, the original ideals were often reduced to mere ends in themselves, overshadowing their intended purpose of fostering broader spiritual and communal goals (MacCulloch, 2003).

The "kerygma", or the oral proclamation of the core message of Christianity, played a crucial role in establishing a foundation for the expansion of early Christian social philosophy. Central to the kerygma was the announcement of Jesus' resurrection and the call for repentance and faith, which emphasized the transformative power of divine grace and the inclusivity of God's salvation (Wright, 2006). This message not only offered hope and redemption to individuals but also laid the groundwork for a communal identity rooted in shared beliefs and values. As the early Christians embraced this proclamation, they began to envision a society characterized by love, mutual support, and social justice, reflecting Jesus' teachings on the importance of caring for the marginalized (Horsley, 1998). Consequently, the kerygma inspired a movement that sought to embody these principles in daily life, leading to the formation of communities that prioritized social welfare and collective responsibility, thus shaping the trajectory of early Christian social thought (Freund, 2001).

A pivotal figure in this transformation was St. Paul. He championed the doctrine of love, underscored the interconnectedness of society, and acknowledged the necessity of civil governance to mitigate human evil. Additionally, St. Paul played a crucial role in shaping early Christian beliefs and organizational structures, establishing important practices such as the Eucharist (Horsley, 2004). His influence, along with that of the Church Fathers, significantly guided the evolution of Christian doctrine and ecclesiastical practices by the fifth century A.D. (Brown, 1989).

The impact of Christian social philosophy on the broader concept of social philosophy and sociology—especially regarding social structure—

cannot be overstated. Through its intricate system of sacraments, Christianity provided early Europeans with a means to confront the dangers and mysteries of existence. Despite spanning approximately six centuries, the ideas of this period exhibit enough coherence to warrant a discussion of the patristic era (Richardson, 1953). The central doctrines articulated by the Church Fathers concerning the origin, nature, and purpose of society can be summarized in several key propositions:

- **Human Nature and Society:** Mankind is inherently social, with society viewed as a natural product, echoing the views of Aristotle and the Stoics.
- **State of Nature:** Seneca's depiction of a "golden" state of nature, characterized by the absence of coercive governance, was equated with humanity's condition before the "Fall" (Brown, 1989).
- **Civil Government:** The need for civil government arose from the "Fall" as a necessary response to the crimes and vices of humankind.
- **Divine Institution:** Although the government was established in response to human failings, it was regarded as a divine institution, with rulers deriving their authority from God; thus, rebellion against them was seen as a rebellion against God and thus sinful (Horsley, 2004)
- **Eternal vs. Temporal:** The value of social institutions was considered temporary and of lesser importance compared to the preparation for the heavenly kingdom, implying that social reform was viewed as relatively insignificant. It was believed that enduring social hardships was preferable to risking one's salvation by striving to improve earthly conditions (Richardson, 1953).

The belief that the poor occupied a specific place within a divine order significantly influenced early Christian charitable practices, as it framed acts of charity not merely as social responsibilities but as

spiritual necessities (Richardson, 1953). This perspective posited that caring for the poor was a way to advance one's own spiritual welfare, creating a reciprocal relationship between the giver and the recipient. By providing alms, individuals could attain spiritual merit, thereby enhancing their prospects for salvation. This understanding was deeply embedded in the early Christian ethos, as the faithful were encouraged to see the act of giving as a divine calling, reflecting the teachings of Jesus on compassion and generosity (Barnes 1917).

Moreover, the emphasis on eschatology—the study of the final destiny of the soul—further shaped attitudes toward earthly values and institutions. In Augustine's *City of God*, he contrasts the transient nature of earthly existence with the eternal significance of the divine (Frend, 2001). This framework led to a devaluation of material wealth and social structures, which were often seen as distractions from the true goal of achieving salvation. Augustine argued that human institutions should be evaluated based on their effectiveness in guiding individuals toward this ultimate spiritual aim. For instance, he maintained that governments and social systems, while necessary to maintain order in a flawed world, should primarily serve the purpose of promoting moral and spiritual growth rather than merely advancing political or economic interests (Horsley, (1998).

This theological perspective encouraged early Christians to adopt a critical stance towards worldly achievements and to prioritize their spiritual commitments. As a result, charitable practices became integral to the Christian community's identity, emphasizing the moral imperative to support the marginalized and alleviate suffering (Wright, 2006). This alignment of charity with spiritual growth reinforced a community ethos centred around compassion and mutual aid, setting a precedent for future social doctrines within Christianity. By framing social responsibilities in terms of divine obligation, early Christian thought laid the groundwork for a social philosophy that



would prioritize the welfare of the less fortunate as a reflection of one's faith and relationship with God (Freund, 2001).

### **The social philosophy of the mediaeval period**

This philosophy emerged organically from the various elements that shaped medieval civilization. From the Romans, particularly through Seneca, came the idea that social institutions are conventional or artificial, stemming from a once-ideal golden age. Additionally, Roman legal thinkers contributed to the concepts of popular sovereignty and the consent of the governed as foundations for imperial power. Christianity introduced the notion of the "Fall," which aligned well with the idea of a descent from a golden age, along with the belief in the divine nature of political authority and the autonomy of spiritual life (Barnes, 1917).

Northern European states further emphasized that political authority was derived from the collective will of the community, reinforcing the Roman lawyers' views on popular sovereignty (Carlyle, 1913). The Christian emphasis on the brotherhood of humanity and the organic unity of Christendom, combined with the clear class distinctions of the medieval era—ecclesiastics, nobility, warriors, and labourers—revived the Platonic idea of society's unity through the division of labour. This echoed Aristotle's emphasis on humanity's natural sociability and culminated in a synthesis of medieval thought that acknowledged society as a natural construct, while also asserting the necessity of government for societal stability (Carlyle, 1913).

The revival of Roman law introduced theories of popular sovereignty, while canon law brought back the patristic idea of a golden age followed by a "Fall," underscoring the need for political organization to maintain order (Rousselle, 2005). For the first time in Western European history, the significance of a strong government as the basis of political authority was seriously considered (Carlyle, 1913). Tyranny was viewed as a violation

of the original contract that legitimized rulers, providing a rationale for rebellion (Runciman, 1951).

Thomas Aquinas, a key figure in Scholastic philosophy, greatly contributed to social thought by endorsing Aristotle's views on human sociability. He asserted that (1) humans are naturally social beings; (2) society requires a shared purpose and interest, as social connections are vital for achieving individual well-being; and (3) higher authority is essential for directing society toward the common good, with rulers utilizing their abilities for the benefit of the community (Gilson, 1955). However, Aquinas's rigid economic regulations faced criticism for stifling medieval commerce and industry (Miller, 1986).

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) envisioned a universal monarchy aligned with the Church to resolve international disputes and facilitate the unfettered exercise of intellectual pursuits (Dante, 2000). In *The Banquet*, he examined the dynamics of fame and notoriety, showing how they develop geometrically and are shaped by their contexts (Carlyle, 1913; Hollander, 2001).

Finally, Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64) and Aeneas Sylvius (1404-64) epitomized the closing of the medieval era by articulating key social and political doctrines. Nicholas, in *De concordatio catholica*, presented a detailed analogy between the state and a living organism, introducing the concept of political pathology and portraying the ruler as a physician addressing the state's ailments based on the wisdom of political philosophers. In his political theories, Nicholas underscored consent as the foundation of political authority and proposed an innovative scheme for representation in governance (Barnes, 1917).

### **Early Modern Social Philosophy**

The social philosophy of the early modern period was significantly shaped by the travels and explorations in both the Old and New Worlds, which facilitated unprecedented cultural exchanges

compared to earlier expansions. Notably, the Commercial Revolution played a key role in this transformation. It introduced a more active flow of capital that undermined the stability, routines, and provincialism of the medieval rural economy. This shift created a new pool of capital, allowing rulers to establish paid bureaucracies and armies, which helped to subdue rebellious feudal lords and pave the way for the formation of centralized national states (Barnes, 1917; Carlyle, 1913).

This philosophical evolution began with thinkers like Machiavelli and Sir Thomas More, who reflected the emerging "nonspiritual" society that arose from the breakdown of the medieval social structure and proposed practical strategies for its reconstruction. Bodin expanded on this, asserting that citizens of these newly unified states should investigate the origins, nature, and justification of the emerging political and social order (Runciman, 1951). His ideas set the course for social philosophy for the subsequent two centuries. Importantly, modern historians widely agree that the Commercial Revolution, rather than the Renaissance or the Reformation, was the primary force that dismantled the medieval order and laid the groundwork for the modern era.

Khaldun later made a clear distinction between episodic history and his own conception of history as a scientific study of the origins and development of civilization. He argued that humans are inherently social beings, as their diverse and extensive needs can only be met through cooperation. However, conflicting desires can lead to disputes, necessitating the establishment of a government to maintain order and stability (Barnes, 1917). Khaldun emphasized the importance of homogeneity for a stable state and highlighted the unity and continuity of historical processes, noting that civilizations undergo constant change, much like individuals throughout their lives (Barnes, 1917; Carlyle, 1913).

### **From social philosophy to sociology**

Towards the beginning of the eighteenth century, a new era dawned in social philosophy. The environmental origins of social philosophy during the period of its transition into sociology are not difficult to discover. The older tendencies, centring on the perfection of the national state, furnished the centre of orientation for the doctrines of the Mercantilists and the Cameralists, whose influence lasted well into the eighteenth century. The reaction against their excessive emphasis upon the paramount importance of the interests of the state and upon the value of state activity found expression in the laissez-faire doctrines of the Physiocrats and the English Classical Economists (Barnes 1917).

Natural science, which had received its highest expression in Newton, reacted powerfully to eighteenth-century political and social philosophy. From this, it seemed probable to the social philosophers that equally simple formulas could be found to explain and furnish the means of controlling social and political phenomena. Whether or not this tendency had any influence upon the development of the contract theory is difficult to determine, but it is certain that it was a foundation of the prevalent eighteenth-century doctrine that a few "self-evident dictates of pure reason" were adequate to interpret and to adjust social and political relations (Carlyle 1913). A new understanding of man as a worthy and noble subject for scientific analysis evolved from further development of science, commerce, and industry making possible the idea of the future progress of the race so admirably expressed. The Industrial Revolution, the greatest transformation in the history of humanity, broke down the foundations of the older social system. As an aid in solving the newly created social problems from the revolution, there came a further development and differentiation of special social sciences. It was because of the necessity of providing a synthetic and systematic science of society to criticize the validity of the multitude of schemes presented as a means of reconstructing the disintegrated social order that

sociology in its present connotation had its origin (Barnes 1917).

### **The concept of social support: nature and forms**

The concept of social support has gained significant recognition since the mid-1970s. Pioneering contributions to this notion were made by John Cassel, Sidney Cobb, and Gerald Caplan. Their groundbreaking work greatly advanced the understanding of social support. Specifically, Cassel and Cobb synthesized evidence demonstrating the positive impact of relational factors on health maintenance and promotion, highlighting social support as a crucial element. Cassel (1974) further explored various social conditions related to health from a functionalist perspective, categorizing them into two groups: those that protect health and those that contribute to disease. He emphasized that social support falls into the protective category, serving as a key factor that buffers individuals from the psychological effects of stress (Cassel, 1976).

For Cobb (1976), he relied on a communication viewpoint to understand social support. He (1976) regards social support as information and classifies three types of information in terms of their utility: information guiding an individual to believe that he or she is minded about and loved, is respected, and valued, and belongs to a network of communication and mutual obligation (Cobb 1976). Related to Cassel's conceptualisation, Cobb asserts that the main protective role of social support rests in its ability to control life stress as an auxiliary of its foremost health effect. This position was maintained by Gerald Caplan (1974) who understood social support as a lasting outline of unceasing or recurrent ties that play an important part in upholding the mental and physical veracity of the individual over time. He went on to list, three categories of support activities: The substantial others help a person to mobilize his emotional resources and master his emotional burdens; they portion his tasks; and they provide him with extra supplies of money, materials, tools, skills, and

cognitive guidance to improve the manner the individual manages his situation (Caplan 1974).

Following the works of previous scholars, new perspectives to describe and theorise the element of social support from different viewpoints rapidly Emerged. Dean and Lin (1977) followed suit and in their work, they considered social support as a product of primary groups that encounter contributory and sensitive needs. Lin et al later reconstructed social support at multiple levels of social networks and construed it to mean the support accessible to an individual through social links to other individuals, groups, and the larger community (Lin et al., 1979). Kaplan and colleagues (Kaplan, Cassel, and Gore, 1977) further agreed with this assertion by pressing that social support is the outcome of social ties and is dependent on the operational and relational features of social networks.

During the same period, Henderson (1977) theorized social support through attachment theory, viewing it as a constructive social interaction under stress. Building on this, Gottlieb (1978) identified four types of informal support: emotional sustenance, problem-solving assistance, indirect influence, and environmental management. Wellman (1981) expanded the concept by categorizing social support as one aspect of social ties, distinguishing it from non-support and identifying five components: tangible aid, emotional support, problem-solving assistance, informational support, and shared activities.

Pearlin et al. (1981) defined social support as access to resources from individuals or organizations to cope with life's challenges. House et al. (1988) focused on the emotional or sustaining quality of relationships, aligning with Berkman's (1984) view of social support as emotional, instrumental, and financial aid. He emphasized social support in terms of social bonds and integration and highlighted its role in improving health and well-being. Despite differing perspectives, scholars agree on the relational and supportive nature of social support,

defining it as assistance through resources obtained from networks (Berkman, 1984;). Social support is multifaceted, encompassing emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support (House et al., 1988) and can be categorized as perceived or actual support (Caplan, 1979). It may also be kin-based or non-kin-based and vary between regular and crisis situations (Dean & Lin, 1977).

### **The African social support philosophy- Ubuntu**

The overarching African social philosophy can be encapsulated by the concept of "Ubuntu," which has received increasing attention in academic discourse over recent years (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Various scholars have interpreted this idea to articulate different facets of African social life. Among those who have provided a thorough examination of ubuntu are Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013), who define it as representing "humanness." Thus, ubuntu can be literally translated to mean "humanity towards others" (Mugumbate and Nyanguru, 2013). Philosophically, ubuntu is used to express a belief in a universal connection that binds all humanity (Mugumbate and Nyanguru, 2013). From its original Zulu context, ubuntu embodies and signifies what it means to be human. While the term may have different expressions in various African languages, it generally conveys a shared understanding of the human spirit.

The term ubuntu is believed to have originated from a Nguni expression: Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu, which translates to "a person is a person through others" (Moloketi, 2009:243). Within an African traditional framework, it conveys themes of unity, compassion, dignity, love for humanity, and the mutual benefits of fostering equitable communities (Khoza, 2006:6). The philosophy of ubuntu is fundamental to many Africans, both on the continent and in the diaspora, and as such, it influences various aspects of daily life throughout Africa (Rwelamila, Talukhaba & Ngowi, 1999).

Ubuntu extends into numerous areas of life, including politics. Nelson Mandela, the former President of South Africa and a key figure in the fight for freedom, described ubuntu as a philosophy that fosters a collective truth and a way of life that supports an open society (Mandela, 2006). The essence of ubuntu is not to suggest that individuals ignore problems; rather, it encourages evaluating how one's actions can enhance and uplift the surrounding community. The philosophy implies that when people are treated well, their performance is likely to improve. Therefore, ubuntu encompasses numerous philosophical ideas that are vital for understanding African social life, which are outlined below (Rwelamila, Talukhaba & Ngowi, 1999).

*Community Above Individual:* The ubuntu philosophy underscores an African perspective on human beings and their connections within a community, reflecting the moral values important to Africans and their social conduct (Dia, 1992). Africans see themselves as social beings engaged in continuous interactions, where a person's identity is shaped through relationships with others (Battle, 1995). Consequently, an individual's existence is intertwined with the community and society at large. This understanding introduces several key philosophical concepts essential to grasping African social life, including trust, interdependence, and spirituality (Mbigi & Maree, 2005). Ubuntu reaches beyond the immediate family unit to encompass the extended kinship networks that are prevalent in many African cultures. As a philosophical framework, ubuntu stands in contrast to individualism, promoting collaborative decision-making. It is a universal principle that resonates across all ages, families, organizations, and communities throughout Africa (Moloketi, 2009). This philosophy highlights the importance of respect and human dignity as foundational elements of existence, bridging cultural divides through cooperation and mutual respect. Advocates of ubuntu are typically open and accessible to others, offering support without feeling threatened by the



talents or successes of others. Embracing ubuntu provides a sense of assurance rooted in the recognition that everyone is part of a larger community (Hailey, 2008). *Positivity*: Within the ubuntu framework, behaviours are deemed acceptable and positive when they are influenced by an individual's ability to consider the community context (Hailey, 2008). Eze posits that rational and normative human actions should focus on positive human values such as love, empathy, kindness, and sharing. In the African context, respect signifies an impartial acknowledgement of someone's rights, values, beliefs, and possessions (Moloketi, 2009). The core values of respect, dignity, care, and sharing are seen as critical to the formation of African communities (Bekker, 2006). The principle of sharing is particularly emphasized; ubuntu teaches that one's own prosperity can be enhanced by sharing with others, thereby elevating their standing within the community. Additional positive actions include visiting the sick, offering condolences, embracing orphans, providing food to the needy, assisting the elderly, and greeting others with warmth and care, all of which are considered ways to enhance one's fortune (Bekker, 2006). *Synergy*: Recognizing that ubuntu aims to promote the welfare of individuals, it asserts that a person's value is derived from social, cultural, and spiritual criteria (Msila, 2008). This necessitates a lifestyle grounded in a commitment to the community, a practical acknowledgement of the common good, and ethical engagement with one another within a balanced community. In this context, being recognized as a true African is contingent upon embracing community and collectivism as fundamental principles (Poovan et al., 2006). Within team environments, ubuntu as a shared value system inspires team members to strive toward the established team values, thereby enhancing their collective functioning (Poovan et al., 2006:25). *Structured and Pro-People Leadership*: In the African context, social and cultural relationships are crucial determinants of a society's success. This perspective prioritizes human beings over material

concerns such as money, goods, and productivity. When individuals are valued and treated well in their daily interactions, overall productivity and profitability tend to follow naturally (Mbigi & Maree, 2005). Consequently, ubuntu promotes a value system that upholds the importance of communal harmony prevalent in African cultures, recognizing that African leadership styles encompass support, sharing, and collaboration. Ubuntu-oriented management encourages shared problem-solving during challenging times, as collective suffering is alleviated through shared experiences (Mazrui, 2001). A distinctive aspect of this African philosophy is its encouragement of a short memory when it comes to grievances (Mazrui, 2001). This principle is passed down from parents and communities to children from an early age, teaching them effective communication, the importance of reconciliation, and the need to release hatred (Mbigi & Maree, 2005). This approach cultivates enduring compassion and resilience within communities and institutions. In African contexts, when one is wronged, both the offender and the aggrieved person engage in a traditional justice process that emphasizes reconciliation over punishment. Typically, the resolution involves the offender compensating the victim with livestock, depending on the severity of the offence, illustrating a form of restorative justice (Mbigi & Maree, 2005). *Care for One Another*: A vital tenet of the Ubuntu philosophy is the emphasis on caring for one another. It calls for community members to be nurturing, understanding, and willing to share (Dia, 1992). This caring approach enables team members to work toward a shared goal. Through a sense of common identity, community members can support one another as if they are part of a single family, reflecting the humanistic African perspective on community and its members (Battle, 1995). The ubuntu philosophy, rooted in communal cohesion, posits that individual success should not come at the expense of others; rather, the objective should be the collective survival and well-being of all. In line with the community-oriented ethos of ubuntu,



individualism is seen as insufficient for understanding the fundamental human needs of society (Mabovula, 2011).

This mindset reinforces the belief that Africans are inherently social beings, with their needs and abilities largely shaped by society and its institutions (Msila, 2008). Thus, the most admirable human behaviour is expressed through the relationships people cultivate within their communities. The communal spirit advocated by ubuntu entails caring for the collective and ensuring equitable distribution of resources among community members (Prinsloo, 2000). In many African cultures, for instance, a slaughtered cow is shared among community members for mutual benefit.

## CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE AND THE FIELD OF RESEARCH

This article contributed to the field of research and overall knowledge of support systems in the following ways:

*Historical and Philosophical Contextualization:* The article offers a thorough exploration of the historical evolution of social support concepts, drawing from Greek, Roman, early Christian, and Ubuntu philosophies. By situating modern social support systems within this historical and philosophical framework, the article provides valuable insights into how historical ideas have influenced current practices and beliefs. This contextualization helps researchers and practitioners understand the roots of contemporary social support systems and recognize enduring principles as well as significant changes over time.

*Integration of Diverse Philosophical Traditions:* The article brings together a wide range of philosophical traditions to analyze social support systems. This interdisciplinary approach not only enriches the understanding of social support but also demonstrates how different philosophical perspectives can contribute to a more nuanced and holistic view. By integrating these diverse

viewpoints, the article encourages scholars to consider a broader range of ideas and frameworks when researching and designing social support systems.

*Identification of Continuities and Transformations:* The paper highlights both continuities and transformations in the conceptualization of social support over time. This contribution is crucial for understanding how certain foundational ideas have persisted and adapted through different historical periods, and how they have been reshaped by various cultural and philosophical influences. Recognizing these patterns can aid in developing more effective and culturally sensitive social support structures.

*Framework for Future Research:* By providing a robust framework for analysing social support systems, the manuscript sets the stage for future research in this area. The framework can guide scholars in examining contemporary social support systems through the lens of historical and philosophical perspectives, potentially leading to new insights and innovative approaches. This structured approach helps in identifying gaps in current research and suggesting directions for future studies.

*Practical Implications for Modern Social Support Systems:* The historical and philosophical insights provided in the article are not merely academic but have practical implications for designing and enhancing modern social support systems. By understanding the evolution of social support concepts and the underlying philosophical principles, policymakers and practitioners can develop more informed and effective support structures. The article's analysis thus contributes to improving the quality and effectiveness of social support interventions in contemporary society.

## CONCLUSION

This article offers a comprehensive examination of the philosophical and historical dimensions of social support systems, tracing their evolution from

Greek and Roman thought through early Christian teachings to the African philosophy of Ubuntu. By elucidating the continuities and transformations in these concepts, the study provides a rich contextual backdrop that enhances our understanding of contemporary social support structures. The integrated framework established herein serves as a valuable tool for future research, guiding scholars, and practitioners in developing more informed and effective social support systems. Ultimately, this exploration not only deepens theoretical insights but also has practical implications for improving modern support structures, fostering a more nuanced and culturally sensitive approach to social assistance today.

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