PHENOMENOLOGICAL ONTOLOGY AS THE BASIS FOR SOCIAL INTEGRATION

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Abstract

This paper was inspired by Jim Unah's ontology of inclusion. He believes that Philosophy should point the way in search of social integration and peaceful co-existence. In his view, the aspect of philosophy that is best suited for this task is ontology, from a phenomenological perspective. This is on account of its ability to inclusively reach deep down to the ontological essence of man, beyond the particularities of race, colour, gender, religion or culture. This is why it is able to overcome the dangers of a monistic, exclusivistic and reductionistic metaphysical thinking that engenders violence in human relationships and societies. Ontology, in this inclusive way, helps us to overcome the menace of injustice, insecurity, terrorism, kidnapping, banditry, ethnic clashes and wars. This paper is significant for nation building and peaceful coexistence. It argues the position that ontology of inclusion, is a strong basis for social integration and peaceful coexistence. The paper undertakes its task in three parts: First, it interrogates human ontology and the metaphysical thinking that disposes man to intolerance and violence. It terminates by establishing what makes phenomenological ontology suitable for the attainment of social integration and peaceful coexistence.

Keywords: Inclusion, Ontology, Thinking, Phenomenology, relationshiop

Introduction

The human society is threatened by intolerance, violence, insecurity, terrorism, ethnic clashes and wars. What seems to be more serious is the poor capacity of governments and judicial institutions to guarantee social integration and peaceful coexistence. This shows the unfortunate level of our social and political turmoil. But what can we do to address this situation? There is a way out, and this is what this paper is about. It argues the position that ontology of inclusion, is a strong basis for social integration and peaceful coexistence. The paper undertakes its task in three parts: First, it interrogates human ontology; then, it takes up the challenge of determining the metaphysical thinking that disposes man to intolerance and violence, and finally, it terminates by establishing what

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makes ontology suitable for the attainment of social integration and peaceful coexistence.

Metaphysical Elements in Man: The Structure of Reason and Human Ontology

In his exploration of the nature of philosophy, Rene Descartes, using the imagery of a tree, argues that the whole of philosophy is like a tree; the roots are metaphysics, the trunk physics, and the branches that issue from the trunk are all the other sciences. (Cited by Heidegger, 1959, p.310). Thus Descartes sees metaphysics as the science of the roots. But he seems to have neglected the soil or the ground that nourishes the roots and in which the tree of philosophy is rooted. This is taken up by Martin Heidegger:

> In what soil do the roots of the tree of philosophy have their hold? Out of what ground do the roots — and through them the whole tree — receive their nourishing juices and strength? What element, concealed in the ground, enters and lives in the roots that support and nourish the tree? (Heidegger, 1959, p.310)

This question of the ground of metaphysics, as that which supports and nourishes the tree, is Being. This is why Aristotle regards metaphysics as first philosophy, and Plato call is "dialectics" (Omoregbe, 1996, p.x). Thus fundamental ontology regards Being as the ground of metaphysics. In other words, being is truly the ground upon which any philosophical discourse is rooted.

Being and Non-Being are interwoven

As Unah has demonstrated in his elaboration of Being and Non-Being, both belong together and are intricately interwoven. He argues that the one could not go without the other, because in the nature of human thought and nature of things, the question concerning something (i.e. Being) and the question concerning nothing (i.e. non-being) always dovetail into each other. (Unah, 2006, p.7)

In holding this position, Unah underlines Hegel's dialectics that both Being and Non-being dialectically belong together and that contending forces are equilibrated at a higher level of synthesis. Unah shows the relationship between ontology and being when he notes:

> Traditional treatment of ontology gave rise to the problem of Being. Being refers to whatever is. Metaphysics is the study of whatever is, that is, the study of reality. Thus, ontology is the strict sense of metaphysics, and a sophisticated professional way of treating the problem of reality in conventional western metaphysics. So we use the terms "ontology" and "metaphysics" interchangeably (Unah, 2006, p.7).

By relating ontology to Being in this way, Unah helps us to see the place and role of metaphysics in conceptualizing reality. Its primary duty is to posit those fundamental concepts, basic axioms or unifying principles for organizing experience and for comprehending reality. Thus, whether we regard metaphysics as first philosophy or as fundamental ontology, the important thing to note is that metaphysics is a foundational activity that is predicated on man's rationality. Man is wired to think metaphysically. Meaning that any time we posit certain grounds as operational principles for directing any activity of ours, we are deliberately or inadvertently engaged in metaphysics. It is in this sense that Etienne Gilson defines metaphysics as "the knowledge gathered by a naturally transcendent reason in its search for the first principles, or first causes, of what is given in sensible experience" (1959, p.252). He argues that the reason why man is a metaphysical animal must lie somewhere in the nature of rationality (Gilson, 1959, p.252).

Thus man, by reason of his rationality is wired to think metaphysically; to long for the real nature of things and the fundamental principles by which experience can be interpreted, ordered, reconstructed and anticipated.

Metaphysical Element in Man: Transcendence

Having established the metaphysical nature of man, Kant calls our attention to the reality of transcendence, rejecting any metaphysical doctrines that takes away human responsibility in the scheme of things. Kant rejects such metaphysical

orientations on the ground that they commit the fallacy of paralogism. They also constitute the ground for all forms of transcendental illusion. By way of reconstruction therefore, Kant embarks upon the examination of pure reason which he says is the seat of human transcendence (Kant, 1964, p.4).

Transcendence, from its Latin etymological root, "trans-scendere" to go beyond, to ascend (Mondin, 1985, p.196), is affirmed to be the movement of the mind into nothingness in order to establish and re-establish what is. Put differently, transcendence describes the activity of the mind in the domain of nothingness. It is an activity of conscious intentionality as the tension toward nothingness. Since every affirmation underlines a negation; and it is by way of this metaphysical negation that what is can be reinforced, transcendence therefore is the "locomotive of existence and lawmaker of experience" (Unah, 2006, p.13).

Transcendence is also "the principle of relations; the principle of forming notions of unity, universality and homogeneity" (Unah, 2006, p.13). What we are saying here is that, by transcendence, we are able to relate one thing to another, connect and correlate experiences so as to render them intelligible. This power of transcendence is what enables us to move from the given to the not-given, from the now to the not-now, from the mundane to the transcendent. It is the capacity to move from beings to their being, in order to reconstruct of experience. Thus, the transcendental movement from *what is* to *what is not* is needed to improve and enhance *what is*.

Metaphysical power in man to go beyond the given, ontological push beyond limits. It is the movement from **what is** to **what is not**. And it is needed to develop **what is**. This is why transcendence is the characteristic and exclusive movement of man with which he continually surpasses himself (Mondin, 1985, p.199). For Karl Popper, transcendence "is the most extraordinary and important fact of all life and evolution, and especially of human evolution" (Popper, 1972, p.58).

Traditional treatment of Ontology and the Stage of Discord

Unah argues that the traditional treatment of ontology, since the emergence of Western thought, rejected whatever does not fit into its scheme of reality. This

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was exemplified in the metaphysics of Parmenides, which domiciled Being and discountenanced non-being. Unah puts this succinctly:

> The decision of the Greeks, at the inauguration of Western European thought, to oppose and reject whatever did not fit into their scheme of reality, was clearly and aggressively articulated in the thesis of Parmenides which sought to domicile Being and discountenance Nothing, having not too long escaped from the mighty yoke of superstition and mythology. The categorical metaphysical assertion of Parmenides is that "Being is", not-being is not". This is an assertion that brooks no nonsense. It recognizes only what is, and admits of neither non-being nor becoming. (Unah, 2006, p.4).

Thus for Parmenides and a host of his influential Greek contemporaries, Being, the One, is, and Becoming, Change, Motion, is an illusion. According to Parmenides, it is contradictory to say that anything comes to be; for if anything comes to be, it is either it comes out of being or out of not-being. If it comes out of being, then it already is, in which case, it does not come to be. But if peradventure it comes from not-being, then it is nothing, since nothing can come out of nothing. This reductionistic and exclusivistic treatment of ontology sets the stage for intolerance, violence and discord. It is therefore necessary to deconstruct this stage in other to pave way for tolerance, harmony and peaceful co-existence.

Since the days of Parmenides, many Professional philosophers continue to delineate reality along determinate lines such as "idea", "matter", "will", "mind", and so on. And in each case the metaphysician of this orientation would magnify his preferred aspect of reality and domicile it as the whole of reality. This is what has resulted in setting the stage for what Unah calls "confusion in the house of being" (Unah, 2006, p.10). This monistic metaphysical orientation is the guarantor of intolerance, violence, vengeance and disharmony in social landscape. This has snowballed into terrorism of all kinds, propelled by the will to dominate and dictate the social and political affairs. It thrives on the annulment of whatever does not fall within the purview or bracket of global gladiators. How can this situation be addressed? This is an issue for phenomenology.

In search of Social Integration: Appeal to Phenomenology

Unah argues that as a science of meaning, Phenomenology urges us to approach phenomena and issues with an unbiased and open mind, without pre-conceptions. The basic phenomenological principle is to let phenomena speak for themselves without pre-conceptions. The Husserllian maxim, *to the things themselves* is a basic wisdom of phenomenology. This is why Husserl calls phenomenology an eidetic science, that is, the science of the essence of things (Omoregbe, 2001, p.24). A critical look at the nature of consciousness reveals that consciousness is always consciousness of something. This is why we often talk of consciousness in terms of conscious intentionality. In other words, thinking is always object oriented (Omoregbe, 1998, p.1). Thinking is always about something. Whenever we think, we think of something. Since whatever a person experiences or thinks about is always about something, then even if what you think about is different from mine it is still something, just as much as mine is something.

Your experience, your moral, social, religious or even political thought or belief may be different from mine but it is something and as such it is deserves attention. As long as the human mind is finite, reality will always be viewed from different perspectives and this calls for humility, openness, and dialogue. To claim that there is only one perspective from which reality can be viewed and that all men must view it from this perspective alone, is to deny the finitude of human mind and fan the ember of intolerance and violence. As a matter of fact, to insist that all men must view reality from only a perspective is an affirmation of the existence of other perspectives. Thus the point being established is that the task of the consummate phenomenologist is the responsibility of unbiased reconciliation of perspectives as far as encounter with phenomena is concerned.

Phenomenology therefore recognizes that reality is multi-dimensional and that whatever we perceive at any point in time is only a moment of the whole temporal process. It recognizes that what I am not thinking about, that which has not occupied my mind, can occupy the thought of someone else making nothing from my perspective to be something from another person's point of view. In other words, no one has a greater humanity in himself than in another, and no one is better equipped to account for what is experienced other than the experiencing subject. It then calls for humility and dialogue to seek the truth together. Hence the phenomenological culture is the philosophical basis for tolerance and peaceful co-existence.

Conclusion

While we maintain that it is in the very nature of man to think metaphysically, we have also observed so far, that the ember of intolerance, violence and strife is caused by a monistic, reductionistic metaphysical thinking and approach to life. We have also demonstrated that the phenomenological approach is a strong basis for social integration and peaceful coexistence.

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