

MISREPRESENTATION OF BEING AS THE FUNDAMENTAL SOURCE OF SOCIAL UNREST

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Abstract

Two things are inevitable in human existence, the subsistence of man in a social milieu and the multifaceted perception of occurrences in nature. The approach of managing these inevitabilities go a long way in determining the stability or otherwise of human society. Mismanagement of these inevitabilities is the basis of social unrest which unfortunately pervades every facet of human endeavour. This problem has also eaten deep into the fabrics of different systems instituted by man to make his living better. Rather than collaborate to bring about the best for man, these systems antagonize each other thereby making life more difficult. This paper argues that the primary and root cause of social unrest in societies is the problem of being exemplified in the misrepresentations of Being. Through a phenomenological approach the paper avers that the solution to this situation is to go back to the basis and resolve the problem of being through the accommodation of non-being. This can be achieved by appreciating the multi-perspectival expression of Being in nature thereby leading to amicable management and easy resolution of conflicts between and within social systems and people.

Keywords: Being, Non-Being, Social Unrest, Conflict, Phenomenology.

Introduction

Being 'is', non - being 'is not', is the greatest cause of calamity of systems and societies. Speaking in the same vein, this could be interpreted as "I am", "the other is not", and if this is the case, then away with the other knowing full well that this is also what is in the mind of the other, who then survives. Man has used his hand (intelligence) to develop his society and is unfortunately using his feet to destroy the same society. Every society is naturally made up of differences; different people with different physical structures, different reasoning capacity, different economic systems, different political systems, different religious systems, different cultural systems, different belief system and different individuals with different idiosyncrasies. These differences do not normally mean contradictions but our attitudes towards these differences lead to contradiction and the genesis

of this is the problem of Being. Thus to say that conflict is ontological to man is not out of place but this does not mean man must leave in conflict. More so, conflict is sometimes essential for change but it should not be allowed to degenerate into a thing of destruction.

How did this come to be and how do we get it out of being will be the focus of this paper. To do justice to this we shall proceed by attempting an understanding of what Being is. Thereafter we shall discuss how this problem of Being began and how it was transmitted into the fabrics of our society thereby leading to social crisis and unrest. This shall be exemplified with the tension and consequences inherent in the capitalist and socialist socio-economic system. We shall then proffer a solution to resolving the problem of Being using the phenomenological approach which allows things to be seen in their true light. This approach ensures crisis resolution and an opportunity for human growth and development.

Understanding Being

The question of *being* has been a central concept in philosophical discourse over the periods of philosophical history. In the ancient pre-Socratic period, this search took the posture of the quest of the ultimate source of all creation thus being cosmological in nature. This can be likened to a search for the ultimate Being which is the source of all beings. Thales posited water, Anaximander proposed *apeiron* while Anaximenes suggested air. Others followed suite with some pitching in atoms while other voted for the four basic elements – air, water, earth and fire.

Within the same period the philosopher who seemed to propose a well articulated conception of being and also laid the foundation for the misunderstanding and misrepresentation of being which from then till date has continued to cause crisis emerged. This was Parmenides. A clearer exposition of his thought would be done when discussing the problem of being but his main focus was that being is one, eternal and unchanging. Plato towed this path of eternal and unchanging but differed saying that being was multiple. He asserts that it is the forms in the world of forms that are beings; these are the realities, eternal and unchanging realities reflected in things around us.¹ The idea provides the prototype for every other thing... the prototype idea has three basic

¹ Joseph Omoregbe, *Metaphysics without Tears: A Systematic and Historical Study*, (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited, 1996), p.2.

properties: it is the-in-itself, it is the true being and it is supra-sensible.² Aristotle defined being as Essence... and conceived being as equivocal except in one of its region where being is univocal, the region occupied by the divine.³ Augustine viewed that God is being itself,⁴ while St. Aquinas believes that being is the act of existence, as act being is the most real of everything being is the effect of God on created things... being is the expression of divine intelligence and will.⁵ Aquinas however maintains that God is Being par excellence while creatures are beings in analogical sense only.⁶

Several conceptions of Being continued to emerge with inherent contradictions until in contemporary period when Martin Heidegger got interested in the question and asked the question "do we in our own time have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word being?"⁷ This brought different insight into the understanding of being and shed brighter light on how being had been misconstrued thereby leading to problems. But how exactly did this misconception set in the first place.

On the Problem of Being

Jim Unah categorically states that the concern with the problem of being is traceable to the thesis of Parmenides.⁸ Stating this point clearly Copleston writes that his doctrine in brief is to the effect that Being, the One, is, and that Becoming, change is illusion. For if anything comes to be, then it comes either out of being or out of not-being. If the former then it already is – in which case it does not come to be; if the latter, then it is nothing. Since out of nothing comes nothing. ... His first great assertion is that "it is". "It" i.e. Reality, Being, of whatever nature it may be, is, exist, and cannot be.⁹

This single assertion became a generational plague that rattled the thought and systems of man. Put in a different mode this thesis of Parmenides can be stated thus; what 'is', is what you believe and what you do not believe or accept 'is not.' This thus leads to projection of your own point of view and denigration of other points of view.

² Joseph Nwizarh, *Being, Essence and Properties: The Paradox of Metaphysical Realism*, (Ile-Ife: Concept Books, 2000), p.12.

³ Joseph Omoregbe, op.cit, p.2.

⁴ Joseph Nwizarh, op.cit, p.12.

⁵ Samuel Stumpf, *Philosophy: History and Problems*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Inc.), p.41.

⁶ Joseph Nwizarh, op.cit, p.13.

⁷ Joseph Omoregbe, op.cit, p.4.

⁸ Jim Unah, *On Being: Discourse on the Ontology of Man*, (Lagos: Fadec Publisher, 2002), p.3.

⁹ Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol.1, (New York: Doubleday, 1985), pp.48-49.

Whereas according to Unah all these points of view are aspects or profiles of reality that are interconnected. Unah writes further that the practice of magnifying an aspect of reality as the totality of reality, the practice of expanding an aspect of being and insisting that it is the whole of being or being itself has created confusion in the house of being.¹⁰ This then generated further problems. According to Unah:

(i) the presentation of aspects or profiles of being as being as being itself objectifies reality; (ii) objectification of reality makes things rigid, creates a world of inflexible things, ideas and people and (iii) a world of rigidity, inflexibility, inelasticity, creates room for contest and conquest and the attitude of vengeance all of which sends being on compulsory leave, on exile.¹¹

Whatever is not my view becomes a non-being, whatever is not my understanding of reality becomes a non-being and what do we do with non-being but to cast it away, banish it, fight it wherever we see it and destroy it. Of course all these actions against non-being will not go without retaliation because what is viewed as non-being by some is the actual being for others who also view the other as non-being. This situation surely brings about restiveness society as will be exemplified in the next section.

Transmitting non-being to Social Unrest and Crisis

The conflict against non-being is prevalent in every facet of every society through conflicting ideologies. Whether economic, religious, ethnic, political etc., refusing to acknowledge the other surely leads to crisis. We shall use the economic cum social conflict between capitalism and socialism as a brief example but not before attempting a brief definition of conflict as understood generally caused by misunderstandings about being.

Conflict according to Ron Fisher is defined as an incompatibility of goals or values between two or more parties in a relationship, combined with attempts to control each other and antagonistic feelings towards each other.¹² Conflict is also seen as the struggle between opposing forces. Conflict may involve two or more actors and could be over

¹⁰ Jim Unah, op.cit, p.9.

¹¹ Ibid, p.9.

¹² Ron Fisher, "Sources of Conflict and Methods of Conflict Resolution", (USA: A Publication of the International Peace and Conflict Resolution School of International Service, 1977), p.1.

resources, ideas, values, wishes and desires, or deep-seated needs.¹³ This is a practical manifestation of the conflict between being and non-being. Both parties now live with threat. Fisher says further that:

Threat leads to counter threat, usually with higher stakes at each go-round. Selective and distorted perception justifies a competitive and cautious approach as opposed to a trusting and cooperative one... competition breeds competition, rather than cooperation... Each party believes in the evil intentions of the other and the inevitability of disagreement, and therefore takes precautionary actions which signals mistrust and competitiveness. When the other party responds with a counteraction, this is perceived as justify the initial precautionary measure, and a new spiral of action and counteraction begins. Through the norm of reciprocity, stronger resistance, but more contentions attempts to gain the upper hand. With each succeeding spiral of conflict, polarization grows and the parties become more adamant and intransigent in their approach to the situation.¹⁴

Let us now see how this plays out in the capitalist and socialist systems and how it led to a cold war of over four decades. Capitalism is an economic, political and social system based on private ownership of property, business and industry, and directed towards making the greatest possible profits for successful organizations and people.¹⁵ Socialism is seen as the set of beliefs which state that all people are equal and should share equally in the wealth of the country or the political system based on these beliefs.¹⁶

Socialism cum communism is thus a system where government controls production and resources. It decides where people live and work, it takes control of the production and distribution of wealth within the society; it is a centralized and regulated system. In capitalism on the contrary people and business control the production of goods. People decide where they live and work. There is freedom in the production and distribution of wealth.

¹³ Oshita Oshita, *Conflict Management in Nigeria: Issues and Challenges* (London: Adonis & Abbey Publishers Ltd, 2007), p.17.

¹⁴ Ron Fisher, *op.cit*, pp.2-3.

¹⁵ *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, (Cambridge: The Press Syndicate of University of Cambridge, 1995), p.191.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.1370.

Bradley Thompson writes that throughout history there have been two basic forms of social organization: collectivism and individualism. In the twentieth century, collectivism has taken many forms: socialism, fascism, Nazism, welfare-statetism and communism are its more notable variations. The only social system commensurate with individualism is laissez-faire capitalism.¹⁷ Under socialism, a ruling class of intellectuals, bureaucrats and social planners decide what people want or what is good for society and then use coercive power of the state to regulate, tax, and redistribute the wealth of those who work for a living... The morality of socialism can be summed-up in two words: envy and self-sacrifice. Envy is the desire to not only possess another's wealth but also the desire to see another's wealth lowered to the level of one's own.¹⁸ Having criticized socialism thus Thompson goes ahead to paint capitalism in the best light. Capitalism to Bradley is the only moral and just system. Capitalism is the only moral system because it requires human beings to deal with one another as trader... that is as free moral agents trading and selling goods and services on the basis of mutual consent. Capitalist is just because the sole criterion that determines the value of thing exchanged is the free, voluntary, universal judgment of the consumer. Capitalism is the only social system that rewards merit, ability and achievement regardless of one's birth or station in life.¹⁹

This sort of antagonistic view of the other and believing "only" in the self is caused by the problem of being and definitely leads to nothing but crisis and conflict as seen in the cold war. Before the cold war for instance, the United States which operates a capitalist system had depicted the Soviet Union which operated a socialist system as almost the devil incarnate but because they had a common enemy in the German Nazi they collaborated in the Second World War. At the end of the war after defeating their common enemy both countries took to war on the ideological front. The cold war is used to describe the relationship that developed primarily between these super powers after the World War. The Cold War dominated international affairs for decades and major crises occurred - the Cuban Missile crisis, South and North Vietnam war, North and South Korea war, the Berlin Wall etc. For many, the growth of weapons of mass destruction was the most worrying issue... Neither side ever fought each other but they did fight

¹⁷ Bradley Thompson, "Socialism vs Capitalism: Which is the Moral System" in Principle, Vol. 1 & 3, October 1993, available at <http://www.ashbook.org/publicat/onprin/v1n3/Thompson.html>.

¹⁸ Ibid. p.1.

¹⁹ Ibid. p.1.

for their beliefs using client states who fought for their beliefs on their behalf.²⁰

For instance this rift brought a separation between North and South Korea which fought a war between 1950 and 1953 because South Korea was capitalist while North Korea was socialist and got support from China. They fought a bitter war and tension still remains till date between both nations irrespective of the fact that they have a lot of similarities. The same thing happened in Vietnam when the Americans supported South Vietnam an anti-communist state against North Vietnam a pro-communist state which got its own support from communist Russia or communist China.

Such conflicts manifest in religion, ethnicity, politics etc., and they can all be traced to the problem of being, and the solution also lies in resolving the problem of being. Attempts at understanding the issue of conflict from other perspectives have not yielded fruitful results hence the need to go back to the basis. Commenting on the complex and problematic nature of social unrest which defies understanding of the empirical sciences Renn *et al* note that:

All in all social unrests can be grouped in the category of complex events. As there are no empirical models that are capable of explain the causal chains that would lead to social unrest a multitude of potential factors need to be considered. These factors also interact with each other and influenced by external conditions and constraints. Furthermore, it is also not clear how one can specify the dependent variable, i.e. the unit in which social unrest can be expressed. Scientific uncertainty relates to the limitedness or even absence of scientific knowledge (data, information) that makes it difficult to exactly assess the probability and possible outcomes of undesired effects...²¹

Renn and colleagues equally run away from an understanding of the situation when they comment that whether the world is inherently uncertain is a philosophical question that they are not interested in focusing on. But they note that it is essential to acknowledge in the context of risk assessment that human knowledge is always incomplete and selective, and, thus, contingent upon uncertain assumptions, assertions and predictions.²² This necessitates a going back to the basis

²⁰ What is the Cold War, available at www.historylearningsite.co.uk/what-is-the-cold-war.htm.

²¹ Ortwin Renn, Aleksandar Jovanovic and Regina Schröter, "Social Unrest," *IFP/WKP/FGS* (2011)5, pp. 4-5.

²² *Ibid.* p. 5.

to trace the problem which is found in the problem of being. The solution lies in resolving this problem.

Resolving the Problem of Being

The solution to any problem can never be gotten without knowing and dealing with its root cause just like you cannot, know what medicine to apply to an ailment without knowing what ailment you are dealing with. Having established that the root cause of conflict, crisis and is the problem of being, that is, the traditional treatment of being which aims at doing away with non-being rather seeing non-being as that which makes being what it is. Such treatment compound the problem and leads to crisis because in the course of negating non-being, 'the other,' being itself is lost, what is left is aspects or profiles of being. Such misrepresentation causes crisis. Thus, to Being must we return to solve the problem of being.

An understanding of being according to Unah is that it is a vast expanse of unchartered territory of possibilities, an unfamiliar difficult terrain...²³ it embodies potentials needed for human development. Heidegger asserts that it is important to understand that Being is not an entity, for this would make it simply one being alongside other beings... Being is the light that illuminates everything else.²⁴ The mistaken conception of being, Heidegger thinks emerged from a detached, theoretical relationship to the world. In that light entities appear like mere presences, and thus presence becomes the central metaphor that determines all philosophical conceptions of being. Something is known to exist only when it presents itself in person... But when anything is merely present, it is experienced in a detached fashion - simply there.²⁵ For instance tools become "merely present" only when they fail, e.g., when they break, are missing, or cannot operate. Then their raw presence suddenly emerges.²⁶ This sort of situation prevails because of discriminatory attributes and modes of viewing being. Heidegger beliefs that the more characteristic and engagement... when practically engaged, people are attuned to their environment; person and world interlock. Within this perspective, skepticism, is unthinkable, nothing could be accomplished if the world were not ready to hand.²⁷

²³ Jim Unah, op.cit, p.23.

²⁴ William Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, (California: Wadsworth, 2002), pp.534-5.

²⁵ William Schroeder, *Continental Philosophy: A Critical Approach*, (Maldren, USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p.216.

²⁶ Ibid, p.216.

²⁷ Ibid, pp.216-217.

The best mode of achieving this task is through the phenomenological method which allows things to be seen and appreciated as they are rather than seen from perspectives, or profiles or aspects.

Phenomenology as an Antidote to the Problem of Being

Phenomenology urges us to approach things and issues with an unbiased, open mind, without preconceptions. Let things be, let things speak for themselves is the phenomenological principle.²⁸ Phenomenology according to Unah and Osegenwune asserts that thinking is always object oriented. Whenever we think, we always think of something.²⁹ This is Edmund Husserl's concept of intentionality.

Describing intentionality, Samuel Stumpf writes that;

By intentionality, Husserl means that any object of my consciousness... is something meant, construed, constituted that is, intended by me. Pure consciousness has no segments it is a continuous stream. Our primitive perception consists of the undifferentiated world. The separate objects of perception are those parts of the stream of consciousness which we as subjects constitute by intending them.³⁰

Unah and Osegenwune point out that since whatever a person experiences or thinks about is always something, then even if what you think about is different from mine it is still something just as much as mine is something. Hence the phenomenological attitude is live and let live".³¹ We can thus infer that the phenomenological attitude is one that breeds tolerance because by accepting that just as your thought or consciousness is directed towards something, that of the other person too is directed towards something. Irrespective of what each person's thought is directed toward we all partake in that same process of intentionality and going by the phenomenological dictum of unbiased, open mindedness, presuppositionless position that thought of the "other" should be so seen. As a philosophy, phenomenology initiates a break from many traditional concerns and inaugurates a new way of thinking. The subject matter of phenomenology according to Sreekumar Nellickappilly is the idea of phenomena, which according to Husserl:

²⁸ Jim Unah and Chris Osegenwune, *Phenomenology and Existentialism*, (Lagos: Fadec Publishers, 2010), p.117.

²⁹ Ibid, p.117.

³⁰ Samuel Stumpf, *op.cit*, pp. 496-497.

³¹ Jim Unah and Chris Osegenwune, *op.cit*, p.117.

...refers to ourselves, other people and the objects and events around us. It also includes the reflection of our own conscious experiences, as we experience them. According to Husserl, phenomena constitute the things as they are given to our consciousness, whether in perception or imagination or thought or volition. The fundamental objective of phenomenology is to study the phenomena, which is experienced in various acts of consciousness.³²

Phenomenology is a process which Husserl called various names: "epoche," "bracketing of presuppositions," "suspension of judgments," and "putting judgments in abeyance." According to Napoleon Mabaquiao, which is generally a process that suspends beliefs about the contingent features of phenomena (or the objects of phenomenological investigation, which include consciousness and its objects) so that analysis will be focused on the necessary features of phenomena.³³ Thus when the capitalist is unbiased about the thought of the socialist, when the Muslim does not have a presupposition about the Christian, when the Yoruba is open minded to the Igbo, then there is a lesser likelihood of crisis, conflict, social unrest or intolerance of any form generating.

Reality is viewed from different perspectives according to Unah and Osegenwune and to claim that there is one and only one perspective from which reality can be viewed and that all men must view it from this perspective alone is to make a false claim and sow the seed of intolerance.³⁴ Wole Soyinka in the same vein while reacting to religious intolerance calls it "the reality of structured ignorance amongst the religion. This structured ignorance manifests as intolerance and misconception of other systems of beliefs whether as philosophies, religions and worldviews."³⁵ Unah also calls it the tribal mindset which is the feeling, point of view or orientation that beside what I know, what I understand, that is, beside the values that I cherish and the system of meaning with which I am familiar, there is total nothing or emptiness which contains nothing whatsoever.³⁶ All these attitudes can be subsumed in the total embrace of phenomenology.

³² Sreekumar Nellickappilly, *Aspects of Western Philosophy*, (Madras: IIT, 2011), p. 5.

³³ Napoleon Mabaquiao, Husserl's theory of intentionality. *Philosophia: An International Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 34 (1) 2005, pp. 24-49.

³⁴ Jim Unah, op.cit, p.117.

³⁵ Ibid., pp.150-151.

³⁶ Ibid, pp.152-153.

Essential in the characteristics of phenomenology is its method of describing things as they appear exactly to us without forcing them into straight jackets of our prejudices and preconceptions.³⁷ Phenomenology thus best suites resolving the problem of being by letting us see things freely whether they are described as being or non-being. Phenomenology lets us accept non-being as part of reality and rather than attempt to extinguish non-being and causing crisis in the process, we should see it as that which makes sense of our own being. Because without something to identify as non-being we won't be able to assert ourselves as being. Unah put this succinctly by saying: I am because others are. By affirming the other I simultaneously affirm my own being. My being is meaningful only relation to the other. Without the other, I myself who reduces the other to nothing is indeed nothing.³⁸

Development cannot happen in an environment of crisis and since this is the only world in which we can exist the onus is on us to develop it to the best it can be. Antagonistic, casting and destructive attitudes lead only to regress. Elements of socialism can be applied in capitalism as is observed in the United States of America (the champion of capitalism) as a mode of cushioning the effect of the recent regression. Also since God is the central focus in religion, I need not kill the other as a mode of showing God that I truly love and am worshiping Him. It is never possible to make everyone have the same beliefs, systems, thoughts, ideas or ideals and since variety is the spice of life, accepting the "others" flavor to be is always a seed of peace and progress.

To this end, we submit to the notion of C. S. Momoh that conflict is a permanent feature of reality, and that the best man can ever accomplish is to strive to manage and contain it.³⁹ This thesis that conflict is a permanent feature of reality according to Momoh is ontological in the sense in which it can be taken to be a law of nature whereas the thesis that conflict is a fact of life is existential in the sense in which it can be taken to be a law of living. Any ontological thesis is general, stronger, and superior to any existential thesis which is particular and specific. The existential derives from the ontological. Life derives from nature. Living is an aspect of reality.⁴⁰ So if living is an aspect of reality, if conflict is an aspect of reality, and if differences is also an aspect of

³⁷ Jim Unah and Chris Osegenwune, *op.cit*, p. 90.

³⁸ Jim Unah, *op.cit*, p.153.

³⁹ C. S. Momoh, "Philosophy and Principles of Conflictology" in *Nigerian Integrative Discourse* Volume 3: Intergroup Tensions, (Lagos: Faculty of Arts University of Lagos, 2005), p. 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

reality, then we can endeavour to accommodate ourselves most of the times and judiciously manage our conflicts when they do occur.

Conclusion

This paper explored the notion that the problem of being is the basis of most societal unrest, conflicts and crisis. Bearing in mind that no man can live in isolation and that we must at different times interact with different people the phenomenological attitude becomes the best way to social stability. Different people are bound to have different idiosyncrasies, orientation, perspectives and even nature is multifaceted. In this wise the phenomenological attitude of letting others be, not being judgemental, not seeing things from only one point of view is the best to resolve and more importantly avoid crisis.

The traditional treatment of objectifying or holding on to aspects of being as being has been shown in this paper to be cause of crisis and understanding of being especially in the phenomenological light has also been shown to be the a good way to resolving crisis thereby creating an enabling environment for the flourishing of the human mind and person which is essential to bringing about creativity which leads to development of the society.

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