

ONTOLOGICAL EQUALITY AS AN INTERCULTURAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE QUESTION OF LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA

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Abstract

Leadership in Africa establishes class differentiation. This creates a yawning gap between the leaders and the led which results into inequality among citizens. Inequality, as it is evident everywhere it persists, is intertwined with injustice. It is also common knowledge that peace cannot be guaranteed where injustice reigns. But the reign of injustice created by leadership patterns is a common phenomenon among almost all African leaders. It then becomes imperative for Africans to adopt a certain intercultural philosophy that will guarantee good leadership in Africa devoid of crass inequality and social injustice. This philosophy is that which advocates for ontological equality. This is equality in terms of specific essence. The primordial equality in which all men are equal as to the existential state whose realization for each individual is required by our essence and divine order. Since the data for this work is non-numerical, the qualitative research approach was adopted in gathering and analyzing data, using both primary and secondary sources. The paper finds out that ontological equality is an intercultural philosophy which emphasizes intersubjectivity and common humanity and if adopted by African leaders will birth good leadership on the continent.

Key words: *Ontology, Equality, Intercultural, Leadership and Dasein.*

Introduction

Equality as a philosophical concept has enjoyed a lot of attention from philosophers of different epochs and various inclinations. It seems the philosophical bent of a philosopher determines his analysis and understanding of any concept at all. Philosophers like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke for instance have the idea of natural equality. For Jean Jacques Rousseau equality is justice. While Karl Marx looks at equality in terms of need satisfaction. This means that people have varied needs of different degrees but each need should be satisfied. Equality could also be looked at in terms of egalitarianism where people are to be treated the same. Jacques Maritain's equality for instance is ontological. It is a kind of primordial equality which is equality in terms of human essence. Man is essentially created equal as to specific essence. It is

actually Maritain's understanding of equality that triggered my inquest into ontological equality as an intercultural philosophy that can facilitate good leadership in Africa. However, my consideration of ontological equality differs from Maritain's in emphasis and orientation. Maritain's ontological equality though partly existential was influenced by his Christian belief which found equality on the act of God's creation. My emphasis and orientation arguing for ontological equality in this paper is on human essential equality within a framework that is basically existential using Maritain's natural equality of the act of God's creation as a starting point.

Perspectives on Equality

Varied opinions on equality are evident in the philosophic history, political science and religious spheres. Equality could be that of condition, outcome, opportunity and ontological. Equality of condition advocates for equal starting point from which people start the pursuit of goals in life. In sporting competition for instance, contenders should start at a common baseline. The notion of equality of outcome talks about distributive justice where all people in society should have the same benefits. While equality of opportunity is that which accepts inequality on the basis that people are *ab initio* given the same opportunities for advancement. On the other hand, ontological equality is the notion that all people are created equal in the eyes of God. For this kind of equality everything is equal by nature. Everyone is created equal by birth and has the right to exist and develop by his nature. It is the primordial equality of human essence.

The idea of natural equality for instance was heralded by Thomas Hobbes in the *LEVIATHAN*. He held that the question of who is better has no place in the condition of mere nature where all men are equal. His argument was that the reign of inequality in the society is an introduction of the civil laws. According to Hobbes, the Aristotelian idea of natural inequality is against reason and experience. He notes in the *Leviathan* thus:

If nature therefore has made men equal, that equality is to be acknowledged; yet because men that think themselves equal will not enter into conditions of peace but upon equal terms, such equality must be admitted.¹

What this implies is that since nature has made all people equal, they cannot only enter into a social contract by equal terms but on equal conditions. However, Hobbes still admits that the entry of people into social contract which saw the institution of civil laws is the birth of inequality in the society. Hobbes admitted the evident existing

¹ C. B. Macpherson, ed.; Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (Britain: BPC Hazell Books, 1906), 211.

exceptional qualities both in body and mind in different people, nevertheless; men are by nature equal when all these exceptions are considered. His basic assertion was that natural equality furnishes all men with an equal hope of attaining their ends.

The arguments for natural equality are not non-perspectival. John Locke for instance argued for natural equality from the perspective of natural right common to all men. In his *Two Treatise of Government* Locke argues that all human beings have the same natural right to both self-ownership and freedom. He states:

A state of equality wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another, there being nothing more evident than that creatures of the same species and rank promiscuously born to all the same advantages of nature and use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another without subordination or subjugation.²

In other words, all men are creatures of the same species and are equal without the right to subject others to their rule and become lords and masters over others. The state of nature that confers on all men natural rights is the kind of liberty that is not a license for everyone to do as he likes. The state of nature has the law of nature to govern and protect it from becoming anarchistic. This law of nature is for Locke the law of reason. He notes: “reason which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions.”³ Implied in the idea of this kind of equality is the fact that reason controls man’s instinct of self-preservation. Man is taught by reason to preserve the rest of mankind since all mankind is equal. Through reason, man also comes to know that all men are the products of God’s creation. This is a discovery of the fact that man is ontologically equal. It seems most arguments for equality have their roots in ontological equality.

Within this frame of thought, D. D. Raphael argued in *The Problems of Political Philosophy* for the equality of all men ontologically. He took as his basis for the discussion of the idea of equality, the statement in the American declaration of independence that “all men are born equal”. For him, the statement “all men are born equal” is meant primarily, not as a statement of fact, but as a statement of right: “all men have right to equal treatment”.⁴ Raphael’s justification for this statement was that since men are not equal in endowments, the claim for so-called equality is the claim for the removal of arbitrary and unjustified inequality. It is the argument of Raphael that though

² John Locke. *Two Treaties of Government*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1906), 309

³ John Locke, *Two Treaties of Government*, 311

⁴ D. D. Raphael. *Problems of Political Philosophy*. (London: Pall Mall Press Ltd, 1970), 184

people's endowments may not be the same, they are not relevant conditions for judging men unequal. There are certain basic capacities that are possessed equally by all men and constitute the distinctive character of man from other animals. This is the capacity for rational choice. On this Raphael argues, "this capacity for rational choice is what makes our common humanity and this is the factual basis for the claim that all men have an equal right of some sort".⁵ The equality of human beings in Raphael's argument stems from the rational capacity that is common to all men and common humanity. Human beings are then equal in the specific essence as humans.

It is then evident that arguments about equality whether that of opportunity, outcome or condition are tailored towards primordial equality of all men which is ontological equality. The kind of equality that emphasizes common humanity on the basis that everything is equal by nature. The claim here is that essentially man is created equal at birth.

Ontological Equality and Intercultural Philosophy

The equality that states that everyone is created equal at birth is what we refer to as ontological equality. It is for this kind of equality that Hegel argues in *The Philosophy of Right* that men are equal as persons. Hegel declares that persons are equal ontologically and therefore, that the whole field of possessions which create the tension of inequality falls outside of this ontological equality of men.⁶ It is this human equality that has its root in ontology and serves as the fundamental basis for human equality that is the foundation for the claim that every human being has a right to equality of treatment.

Within this realm of thought Jacques Maritain maintains that there is a concrete and ontological equality of all men. He opines, "all of us are born equally men... equal as to specific essence and consequently equal as to the existential state whose realization for each individual is required by our essence and divine order".⁷ What Maritain implies here is that every human being is naturally equal, one to another, since we all share in the specific essence of humankind. The humanism of Maritain is further emphasized with the opinion that:

⁵ D. D. Raphael, 186

⁶ George W. F. Hegel. *Philosophy of Right*. Translated by T. M. Knox (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), 44

⁷ Joseph W. Evans & Leo R. Ward eds. *Social and Political Philosophy* (New York: Image Books, 1955), 110 – 111

The equality in nature among men consists of their concrete communion in the mystery of the human species; it does not lie in an idea; it is hidden in the heart of the individual and of the concrete, in the root of the substance of each man.⁸

The equality Maritain advocates for here is that of essence, the essence common to the human species. It is the primordial substance that defines man's common humanity and makes man ontologically equal.

Jacques Maritain's ontological equality was influenced by his Christian belief. His observation was that the realness of equality and unity in nature is revealed to man as very precious and as a fundamental basis of existence, more important than all the differences and inequalities superimposed on him. Man can only realize the realness of equality if he respects and loves the secret he carries within him and the good of which he is capable through natural love which reveals man's closeness to nature. It is this natural love of the human being for his own kind which reveals and makes real the unity of the human species. The Christian concept of equality is the unity of mankind and for Maritain this is the truest name of the equality in nature between men.

Ontological equality among men is also manifest in birth and death. This is very explicit in Heidegger's philosophy of death and the thrown character of Dasein in the world and in a situation he never chooses. Dasein (Being there) is a German word which Heidegger uses in his ontology to designate human existence. Dasein does not specifically refer to man. However, man assumes the prerogative of Dasein because he is the only being that understands itself and other beings. Heidegger made death an important theme in his existential analysis of Dasein because it reveals the particular distinctive nature of the being of Dasein. Death is the utmost possibility of Dasein for Heidegger. In existence Dasein is always incomplete because existence itself implies a "not-yet" which indicates a certain outstanding possibility of man that cannot be outstripped. This possibility which constitutes a not-yet of Dasein (Death) reveals to Dasein its own temporality. Being in time, Dasein cannot realize his own possibilities of being a whole. There must remain for Dasein a futural outstanding possibility which according to Heidegger is "the pure possibility of no longer existing which cannot be interpreted as a lack, something yet to be added to Dasein to make it complete. For

⁸ Donald & Idella Gallagher, eds. *A Maritain Reader* (New York: A Division of Doubleday and Company Inc; 1966), 269

when this possibility falls due, Dasein no longer is its 'there'.⁹ Death then constitute the finitude of every Dasein at all.

Heidegger's understanding of death reveals death as that which cannot be actualized but as anticipation. But this attests to the ontological equality of man for the fact that all men are of this character. No man can experience his own death since it is a possibility that eludes personal grasp. Our near experience of death seems to be in the death of a close relation where man feels the pains of losing a dear one. So, death whether as an anticipation or occurrence or event reveals the ontological equality of man. In death man is equal.

The factual Dasein is in the world as a being thrown in the world in circumstances which are not of his making. By birth Dasein exists in the world as a factual concretion, and as factual, Dasein shares a common environment and time with other beings. Human beings however, do not exist in the world as categorical beings but as existential beings. Human beings are not just things. They are not just things existing in the world because "their being is an issue for them",¹⁰ according to Heidegger. Man's existence can be differentiated from that of things occurrent by the fact that human existence is characterized by mineness. This mode of existence is only peculiar to Dasein which is a German term for human existence. According to William Large, Heidegger's use of the word "Dasein" is much more specific than human existence. "What it refers to is the ontological character of human existence which is entirely lacking in any other being."¹¹ It is not any accidental quality derived within the world. It is the ontological character general to men that emphasises the primordial and natural equality evident in the specific character of man. Essentially, man is equal without ruling out the possibility of acquired accidental character traits as a thrown possibility. Man is ontologically equal at birth.

Man has a peculiar character of existing in the world understandingly. This unique character is common to all men. Man is a being that always tries to understand himself and the environment in which he lives. He is never satisfied with his situation. This character of self-understanding and always wanting to overcome his situation defines the auto-transcendence nature of man. Chukwudozie in arguing that man is in

⁹Michel Haar. Heidegger and the Essence of Man. SUNY series in Continental Philosophy, Edited by Dennis Schmidt. (New York: State University of New York, 1998), 3

¹⁰William Large. Heidegger's Being and Time (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 34

¹¹William Large, Heidegger's Being and Time, ... 26

continuous movement oriented towards the reality of his world notes that “man is never satisfied with his present conditions and achievements. He strives towards bettering his condition. In other words, man transcends himself quite often with respect to all he thinks, wishes and desires. Hence auto-transcendence becomes a movement outside as beyond self.”¹² This going beyond self is aimed at giving meaning to man’s life and for the satisfaction of needs. Auto-transcendence coupled with rationality makes man a creative and inventive being to match human needs. This character of self-transcendence is intrinsic to man in general.

Man is also a being of consciousness. He has the ability as an experiencing subject to be conscious of an object and be aware of the fact that he is conscious of such an object. Man’s awareness of the fact that he is conscious makes him a self-conscious being. Every act of consciousness is accompanied by an awareness of itself. According to Aron Gurwitsch, the self-awareness of an act of consciousness is a necessary condition for the existence of this act. That every act of consciousness carries self-consciousness with it, so that this self-awareness accompanies us throughout all our conscious life.¹³ The inner awareness we have of every experienced act is common to all men. Self-consciousness is one of the ways ontological equality among men is manifest. This ontological equality is a philosophy that is not cultural specific. It is an intercultural philosophy that promotes the essential equality of all men.

Intercultural philosophy discourse became prominent in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s because of the increased consciousness of the cultural rootedness and biases of philosophical traditions. There arose a need to establish the interculturality of philosophy to emphasize the fact that philosophy is not cultural specific. This led thinkers such as Ram Adhar Mall, to develop what he called ‘intercultural philosophy.’ According to Mall “intercultural philosophy stands for a process of emancipation from all types of centrisms, whether European or non-European,” and that it seeks to exhibit “a philosophical attitude, a philosophical conviction that no one philosophy is the philosophy for the whole of humankind.”¹⁴ He continues: “It is the task of intercultural philosophy to mediate between...two ends, i.e., the specific philosophies as they are

¹²Chukwudozie Charles N. “Man Know Thyself” (Man: Nature and Progress). In S.C. Chuta ed. *African Humanities (Humanities and Development)*. (Onitsha: Cape Publishers International Limited, 2000), 22

¹³Aron Gurwitsch. *The Collected works of Aron Gurwitsch (1901-1973) Volume 111. The Field of Consciousness: Phenomenology of Theme, Thematic Field, and Marginal Consciousness*. Richard M. Zaner. ed. (New York: Springer Science-Business Media B. V. 2010), 453-454

¹⁴Ram Adhar Mall, *Intercultural Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), xii.

found in different cultures and the universal philosophy which is not culturally bound itself.”¹⁵ This suggests the possibility of a universal philosophy which considers philosophical questions and methods of resolving those questions that are not restricted to specific cultures. It then means that philosophy itself may cross, or even transcend, cultures. It is Mall’s position that “Methodically intercultural philosophy...is based on comparative studies, and in particular on the comparison of cultures and their philosophical traditions.”¹⁶ Though the methodology of intercultural philosophy is based on comparative studies of philosophical traditions it is not the same as comparative philosophy.

For Franz Martin Wimmer, intercultural philosophy is described as “the endeavour to give expression to the many and often marginalised voices of philosophy in their respective cultural contexts and thereby to generate a shared, fruitful discussion granting equal rights to all,” and its aim was “to facilitate and develop a new and timely culture of a plurality of philosophical dialogues between thinkers from around the world” – what Wimmer called a “polylog.”¹⁷ What is important for Wimmer here is to raise awareness of the philosophies and wisdom traditions of different cultures. This awareness will deemphasize claims of cultural superiority as it regards to thoughts patterns and will encourage exchange of ideas to enhance progress on philosophical issues. William Sweet corroborates Wimmer’s thoughts;

Intercultural Philosophy entails a new orientation because, in acknowledgment of the cultural situatedness of philosophy, claims must prove themselves interculturally, and cultures must be consciously kept in view as the context of philosophizing. It entails a new practice because this consciousness demands a departure from an individual, mono-cultural, frequently ethnocentric production of philosophy and seeks instead a dialogical, process-oriented, fundamentally open polyphony of cultures and disciplines.¹⁸

¹⁵Ram Adhar Mall, “The Concept of an Intercultural Philosophy,” tr. Michael Kimmel, in polylog: Forum for Intercultural Philosophy, 1 (2000). Online: <http://them.polylog.org/1/fmr-en.htm>.

¹⁶Mall, “The Concept of an Intercultural Philosophy.”

¹⁷Franz Martin Wimmer quoted in William Sweet (ed) What is Intercultural Philosophy. Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change Series I. Culture and Values, Vol. 44. (USA: The Council of Research in Values and Philosophy, 2014), 4.

¹⁸William Sweet (ed) What is Intercultural Philosophy. Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change Series I. Culture and Values, Vol. 44. (USA: The Council of Research in Values and Philosophy, 2014), 5.

Implied in this argument is the fact that cultures may be the context of philosophizing, the new orientation of thought intercultural philosophy seeks to develop allows for a discussion of all philosophical problems from an intercultural perspective. It is a kind of hybridization of philosophical ideas that allows for fundamental similarities and illuminating differences among cultures.

The Question of Leadership in Africa

African leadership problem is premised on lack of a coherent philosophy without cultural limits that will address issues that hinder good leadership among most African leaders such as ethnicity, nepotism, religious extremism and corruption. Leadership in African is characterised by unequal treatment of citizens of African states on the basis of predominantly, ethnic and religious considerations. This practice inhibits good leadership on the African continent and aggravates the problem of both social and economic inequalities as a result of inappropriate distribution of resources and provision of equal opportunities for citizens to actualize their innate potentials. Ethnicity and religious fundamentalism bring about corruption, nepotism and other vices which are effective tools of weakening the capacity and willingness of the state to function effectively and pursue policies that promote growth. According to Rose-Ackerman, “accountability to the general public is compromised since those in power often misuse public trust and the power entrusted to them for private gains”.¹⁹ When ethnicity and religious fundamentalism reign, nepotism, corruption and other social ills become imminent and the result is lack of accountability to the public and poor quality of leadership.

The genesis of ethnic bias in Africa is traceable to the colonial days. Indigenous African tribes were woven together by the colonialists without taking into perspective their cultural and religious differences. Ethnic, cultural and religious fault lines were created by this arbitrary amalgamation of different African cultural and linguistic groups without taking their peculiarities into consideration. The amalgamation of the southern and northern protectorates with the colony of Lagos to form what we have now as Nigeria is a good example. Since the amalgamation, Nigeria has never united in any real sense of the word unity. The Nigerian civil war of 1967 – 1970 was as a result of lack of unity and a philosophy of togetherness among the amalgamated nations. Nigeria is

¹⁹Rose-Ackerman. S. *Corruption and Government* (causes, consequences and reform). (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 91 148

ravaged by terrorism and general insecurity arising from nepotism which has characterized the government of President Buhari. This injustice has also heightened secessionist agitations from some parts of Nigeria. The crass nepotism of Buhari's administration in his appointment of people in key positions of leadership and his refusal to name killer herdsmen as terrorists and deal with them as such because they are members of his tribe and religion has divided Nigeria now more than ever.

Buhari as a leader has forgotten the common humanity of all Nigerians. He has failed to realize that ontologically, man is equal both to his specific essence as man and his existential state. The non-realization that man is ontologically equal is a bane to good leadership in any society.

This failure to acknowledge the essential equality of man is common with most African leaders. Countries like Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Burundi have witnessed very destructive ethnic tensions. The rise of Ethnic groups against one another has resulted in the death of hundreds of thousands of people in these countries. The ethnic tensions between the majority Hutu group and the minority Tutsis came to its peak in 1994 and killed almost 800,000 people, most of the victims being Tutsis and some Hutus who opposed the Hutu-led government's repressive policies.²⁰ According to Wakabi, a similar conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi group resulted in a war that lasted for 12 years from 1993, claiming about 300,000 lives.²¹

It is important to note that social and economic inequalities created by failure of leadership by African leaders are breeding grounds for conflicts and insecurity on the African continent. To curb this negative trend, African leaders need to adopt an intercultural philosophy of ontological equality of all men. This is a primordial and natural equality that emphasizes the intersubjectivity of all men and abhors aggregation under whatever guise.

Concluding Remarks

We have considered ontological equality and have found out that it is an intercultural philosophy in the sense that essentially man of whatever race and culture is equal. Intercultural philosophy is a philosophy that is not cultural specific but finds meaning in any human culture at all. Ontological equality in whatever form considers the essence of man. Its preoccupation is with what makes us human. It is a kind of humanism that

²⁰Harsch, E. UN Seeking to avert a new Rwanda. *Africa Renewal*, 18(2), 2004; 14

²¹Wakabi, W. Elections to hold in Burundi. *Africa Today*. 11 (4), 2002; 26-27.

concerns itself with a system of values and beliefs that people of whatever background are born equal, have common ability of consciousness, a common rationality and equal in birth and death. The myriads of inequalities evident in the world among men are accidental creations of man in his attempt for self-realization and self-actualization within the world of daily life. Inequalities such as economic, social, political, bodily size and height are non-essential and do not define the nature of man. Ontologically, man is equal as to the specific essence.

The realization of this ontological equality among men makes it possible the perception of other human beings as inter-subjects and not objects to be used. This intersubjective understanding confers on man a unique and identical character. It establishes man on the basis of his nature ontologically equal. This philosophy of common essence of all men will help African leaders overcome ethnicity, nepotism, religious fundamentalism and the greed of corruption which have retarded growth on the continent in almost all spheres.

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