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Humanism and Conflict: The Role of Philosophy in Social Reconstruction and Harmony

The text is a result of a series of Philosophy seminars held between April and May 2001 at the then University of Durban-Westville (today the University of Kwazulu-Natal) in the Republic of South Africa. Given the title of the text *Protest and Engagement*, it is safe to assume that that was the broad theme of the seminars. The text is a publication of the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy (RVP) on "Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change." It falls under the series which covers Africa. In this second series, there are seven volumes in all, *Protest and Engagement* being the latest. In the series, volumes 1 and 5 cover Ghana, volumes 2 and 4 cover Uganda, volume 3 Nigeria, and volume 6 South Africa.

Protest and Engagement consists of an introduction and nine chapters, each chapter being an essay that was read during the seminars. Common to all the papers is that they fall within the sub-disciplines of either ethics or social philosophy: an area in which the discipline of Philosophy is fairly strong at the university of Kwazulu-Natal. Patrick Giddy's introduction describes, in a synoptic way, the nine essays in the text. He also clearly explains and justifies the title of the text. In the absence of the introduction, the reader would have found it difficult to relate the title to the contents of the essays.

The first chapter is an essay by Richard Pithouse titled "Frantz Fanon and the Persistence of Humanism." In the essay, Pithouse shows that the humanism advocated by Fanon is a new humanism; one that is opposed to the hu-

manism that was used to legitimize the ideology of colonialism. Fanon's humanism is expanded to include all humanity. This is contrary to the views of some among the recent crop of thinkers (post-structuralists and postmodernists) who see humanism as an anachronistic ideology.

Humanism is further split into two: reactionary humanism and revolutionary humanism. Reactionary humanism consists of the replacement of the transcendence of God with the transcendence of Man (a European Man). This aspect of ideology serves very well as a repressive tool. In revolutionary humanism, human beings exist in the plane of immanence and they have the potential to awaken and use, freely, their creative energies to engage with and change the realities of the world in which they find themselves (p. 15). Fanon is quite critical of reactionary humanism.

Pithouse presents Fanon's thought not as egalitarianism in the sense of aspiring to conformity, but in the sense that everyone has, equally, the opportunity to develop oneself freely. In the main, Fanon's humanism is presented as containing three aspects: first, Existentialism, for in existentialism is the belief that human condition is to be free—in the sense that existence precedes essence—and to be fully responsible for the exercise of that freedom (pp. 20-22); second, it sees humans in terms of desires—Fanon is opposed to instrumentalism and mechanistic explanations, for these deny humans the freedom and want to desire (pp. 22-27); and third, it

sees humans as inter-connected rather than as the atomic units of English liberal philosophy (pp. 27-29).

On the face of it, these three aspects appear contradictory. However, Pithouse does well to reconcile the inconsistencies. He also explicates some of the major differences between Fanon and Marx. Whereas Marx's views were betrayed by a new transcendence that elevated his views to the level of a religion, Fanon never abandoned his commitment to immanence.

Pithouse's essay is the longest in the text, and he succeeds quite well in his objective of showing that Fanon's thought cannot be properly understood without reference to his humanism. The essay is elegantly written in terms of presentation, style and diction. It is also quite resource-laden. Anyone interested in Fanon's thoughts is offered a wide range of relevant references.

The second chapter is an essay by Gerard McCabe, titled "The Personalism of John Macmurray." The essay begins with a statement of what personalism as a philosophy is about (pp. 35-36), followed by a biography of John Macmurray (p. 37). Thereafter Macmurray's thought is presented under three subtitles, namely "The Person as Agent," "Beings in Relation," and "Religion."

In the section "The Person as Agent," Macmurray rejects Descartes's representation of the mechanistic view of the world and of the human person. He also finds fault with Kant's organic view of the world and of person. In "Beings in Relation," the argument is that the self who is agent does not exist in isolation from other agents but in relationships with other human beings. In "Religion," the position explicated is that relations could break down, hence the need for religion to maintain the bonds of friendship and community.

In all fairness, McCabe had too much on his plate. He lists six texts by Macmurray from which he summarized Macmurray's personalism, yet he actually reasonably dwelt on only two of them. Perhaps it would have been more beneficial if McCabe had focused on an aspect of Macmurray's personalistic philosophy as explicated in one or two of his texts. This would have given him more space to be critical and detailed. As the essay stands, it is largely expository: the reader hardly sees McCabe's mind in action.

In the essay there are some glaring typographical errors. An example is the sentence, "it is one of Macmurray's beliefs that to be a person mans [sic] we are in relation" (p. 36). The following sentence is also not well-

structured grammatically: "For Macmurray, it is this radical distinction between subject and object is what is most objectionable" (p. 38). Also, "Rousseau" is at one instance typed as "Rouseau" (p. 41). Normally, in culture, philosophy and ethics the term "human person" is conceived as a trivial tautology, yet McCabe uses this term without qualification.

Chapter 3 is an essay titled "The Ethical Boundaries of Business: Questions of Integrity" by Pravasan Pillay. The essay is a response to A. Z. Carr's article, "Is Business Bluffing Ethical?" In the article, Carr presents arguments in favor of business bluffing. Pillay carefully analyzes these arguments and arrives at the conclusion that the world of business should be subjected to the same ethical standards that are applicable to the rest of society.

Pillay begins the essay by criticizing Carr's supposition that our business and private lives are separate from each other, and, as such, we cannot expect the ethical standards of our private lives to rule over the ethical standards of our business lives. He then proceeds to falsify Carr's position that business has the impersonal character of a game in which the act of deception is considered a legitimate and necessary tool for one to attain success. Thereafter, he argues that deception within business leads to conformity and a loss of personal integrity, values and identity (pp. 51-52).

Pillay's analysis and critique of Carr's position is rigorous and logical, and is a good example of the relevance of philosophical analysis to some practical everyday problems. A good number of "successful" businessmen and businesswomen would find a lot to think about by reading Pillay's essay. The essay is well organized. However, on the first page of the essay there is a typographical error, i.e., "enti-globalisation" (p. 47).

The essay by Refiloe Senatla, titled "Understanding the 'Criminal' in an Unjust Society," makes up the fourth chapter. The essay revolves around the Russian novelist Feodor Dostoevsky's text *Crime and Punishment*. Dostoevsky's text raises serious ethical issues concerning the act of killing. In the text, a young man, Raskolnikov, kills an old, crazy, greedy, evil, sick woman. The question then arises, is this act of killing justified? Senatla thinks that it is defensible and justifiable, everything considered. However, several readers are bound to find Senatla's equation of "killing someone" and "letting someone die" as a premise to justify Raskolnikov's action to be unconvincing (p. 61). The final conclusion arrived at by Senatla is provocative and raises more questions than answers. Do two wrongs make a right? Does the

fact that the old pawnbroker (woman) was guilty make Raskolnikov's action not criminal? What is right or wrong? What is criminality?

The position adapted by Senatla is relativistic; a position considered by most renowned ethicists as undesirable, for if it were operative everything would pass muster. This essay is the shortest in the text; perhaps Senatla should have taken time to discuss some of the tremendous amount of relevant literature in this area. This would have given the essay some philosophical force. As the essay stands it is more of a summary of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. One would also wish that Senatla made reference to the several reviews on *Crime and Punishment*.

The fifth chapter by Symphorein Ntibagirirwa analyses the moral crisis that the African society finds itself entangled in today. Ntibagirirwa argues that the moral decadence Africa is currently in stems from the fact that Africans have moved away from their (traditional) value system. Two factors have enhanced this move. First, because of the socio-ethically communitarian nature of the African value system, the founding fathers of most African nation-states mistakenly thought that it was a sure ground for Marxist socialism (pp. 70-73). The second mistake is that, with the collapse of the Marxist socialism in the Soviet Union, Africans are now busy embracing liberalism. This has only helped in pushing them further from the African value system (pp. 73-75).

Ntibagirirwa argues that now that Africa is entering the age of economic and political universalism, Africans should redeem "and redefine themselves on their own ontological foundations, rather than jumping on what is offered by other metaphysical grounds" (p. 74). His "suggestion is that virtue ethics can help redefine the African as a community being, who, in turn, can chart a way back to the ultimate African foundation of his being" (p. 75).

Anyone genuinely interested in African philosophy and who has done some readings in the area will find Ntibagirirwa's essay to be quite refreshing, whereas one who is not well grounded in African philosophy will find it to be thought-provoking and well documented. The essay is well written and clearly presented. The bibliography is relevantly rich. However, I find it rather strange that Ntibagirirwa does not draw from the works of Bennie van der Walt, Augustine Shutte and Ramose. These authors have written extensively on African philosophy having undertaken their research in South Africa.

Chapter 6 is an essay by Olga Yurkivska. According

to the author, the aim of the essay is to "present a comparative study of Russian and African thinkers on communitarianism philosophy and ethics" (p. 83). However, more accurately the comparison is between an African philosophy of life—*Ubuntu*—(not thoughts of individual African thinkers as such) and the thought of Russian thinkers namely Khomyakov, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy on *Obschina*, the traditional Russian peasant community. The notable similarities identified between the thoughts include a strong spirituality, collective consciousness, emphasis on the values of co-operation, sharing, participation, reciprocity, empathy, and harmony with nature (p. 83). In undertaking this comparative approach, Yurkivska has gone against Kwasi Wiredu's advice and warning on "how not to compare European philosophy and African thought." [1]

Despite the fine efforts at comparing and contrasting *Ubuntu* with *Obschina*, there is a marked imbalance in the presentation of the two views. Many more pages are devoted to the latter, perhaps at the expense of the former. One gets the feeling that *Ubuntu* is employed as a means to explicate *Obschina*. This, in itself, betrays Yurkivska's objective of presenting a comparative study.

One significant difference between Yurkivska's essay and that by Ntibagirirwa (chapter 5) is that, whereas in the latter essay the author attempts a solution to the socio-ethical problems that have bedeviled Africa, Yurkivska's conclusion is an anti-climax. She merely "hopes that the people of Africa will some day find the way" (p. 98).

Chapter seven, an essay by Richard Sivil addresses itself to the following environmental crisis. Humankind has grown and developed socially and economically to a point that, if present trends continue, the earth's natural systems will be impoverished. So, what should we do? This question is the focus of the essay.

Sivil argues science should not be given full responsibility for addressing the environmental crisis. He gives reasons as to why (p. 104). Similarly, he argues that government policy will do little to correct the situation as long as the values informing our actions remain unchanged. The correct path, we are told, is to start questioning the values that inform our actions (p. 106). Sivil goes on to argue that the three main ethical theories are, for the most part, applied in anthropocentric ways and as a result are inadequate for the development of an environmental ethic. In fact Sivil's position is that it is the anthropocentric nature of ethics that has played a major role leading to the environmental crisis. The new envi-

ronmental ethic should not be anthropocentric. Clearly a wider and more encompassing ethic is required, one which extends moral concerns beyond human boundaries (p. 114).

A minor confusion in the essay is that at one instance, Sivil refers to teleological, utilitarian, and deontological theories as the three main classes of ethical theories (p. 107). Yet on a later page, he asserts that teleological, consequential, and deontological theories are the three main classes of ethical theories (p. 108). This gives the wrong impression that, as ethical theories, utilitarianism and consequentialism are synonyms. The truth is that, whereas utilitarian theories are consequential, not each and every consequential theory is utilitarian. Rightfully speaking, it is consequential and teleological theories that are synonyms, yet Sivil presents them as different ethical theories.

Chapter 8, titled “Making Sense of Being in Disgrace” by Patrick Giddy, revolves round J. M. Coetzee’s views as expressed in his two texts *The Lives of Animals* and *Disgrace*. In the first section of the essay, Giddy argues for our understanding of animal lives. More appropriately, he argues that it is possible for us to sympathetically understand non-human animals (p. 121). In the second section, Giddy presents Coetzee’s critique of the rationalist tradition: a tradition in which in general, “reason” is opposed to “nature” and cuts off humans from the animal kingdom (p. 122). The final section is an argument to the effect that only if empathy is warranted and called forth by the kind of connectedness we have to all living creatures, could rules of moral behavior be objectively binding on the free conscience (p. 128).

Though academic, the essay by Giddy is rather difficult to follow and hence not easy to appreciate on the first reading. The difficulty stems from the fact that there is an apparent disconnection between the two texts by Coetzee, and the essay does not clearly bridge the gap. Another weakness of the essay has to do with Giddy’s style of writing. At some junctures he has used several dashes even in cases where the conventional usage of a comma or parenthesis would have sufficed. In the second last paragraph of the essay the use of dashes has in a sense compromised comprehension.

The last chapter by Nkosinathi Owen Sotshangane falls within the broad area of applied ethics. It is titled “The Nature and Role of Applied Ethics in the Public Sec-

tor.” The essay is divided into three sections. The first section is fairly general. It addresses itself to the general question of the basis and nature of ethics. The second section deals with corruption and maladministration as moral and ethical concerns. Worth noting is that Sotshangane, unlike Senatla’s essay (chapter 4), adapts the conventionally accepted view that ethical principles and judgments are universal. And on that basis he criticizes corruption and maladministration as unethical modes of conduct (p. 139). In the third section (and in the conclusion as well), Sotshangane offers some qualities that are essential for public officials in the quest to fight corruption and maladministration. He also recommends some moral principles necessary to ensure good public administration. These are consistency, impartiality, responsibility, accountability, trustworthiness, and the maintenance of a high degree of ethical and moral standards in the public sector (p. 142).

A look at the public service in several countries in the world indicates that most of them have ethical codes of conduct in place, which take into account Sotshangane’s recommended principles, yet these public services still suffer from corruption and maladministration. This is an indicator that much more needs to be done well beyond merely having sound moral principles.

Given that Giddy’s text is a collection of essays by various individuals, it would have been useful to devote a page or two giving brief biographies of the contributors. Also worth noting is that the editorial team failed to detect the minor discrepancies on the titles of chapters one and two as they appear at the beginning of the chapters and in the table of contents. On the balance, however, Patrick Giddy’s *Protest and Engagement* is a good addition to the literature in the field of ethics and social philosophy in African studies. Those interested in such studies will no doubt find the text to be a useful addition to their libraries. Giddy’s efforts in putting together the nine essays is both invaluable and laudable. The Council of Research in Values and Philosophy (RVP), which made the whole project possible, deserve credit as well. One would only wish that they extended the project to interested parties in other African countries, notably francophone Africa, and also the Caribbean.

Note

[1]. Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

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