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Social Engineering and Ambivalence of Human Interest:

The Nigeria experience

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ABSTRACT

The common good in this write up is identified with the harmonious complementarism postulated as the authentic foundation of all human interest. It is argued that if the common good is placed above all private interests in a society, social action would then be judged as rational. This is predicated on the reflection that no individual or group of individuals would want to carry out an action that would devastatively affect his person, relation or society. Where such an action is chosen, then, it tantamount to an ambivalence of interest which entails a double capacity effect. This implies that the negative outcome of one's action presupposes the ignorance of such an effect prior to the action. This is because no one would want to deliberately or consciously destroy himself. Self-destruction here is viewed as a detachment from the common good and the lack of the awareness of our multi-dimensional interests in a particular situation. The Nigerian society is considered as a case in point where selfish actions are taken both in private and public life such that sooner or later they produce negative effects directly or indirectly. This calls for a design or reconstruction of our social institutions or structures that will enable us to rationalize our interest/actions. The remedy includes relating our interest to the ontological reality or absolute being viewed as a total reality with no missing link.

INTRODUCTION

The term ambivalence connotes phrases such as "both sides" or "double capacity". The *New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of the English Language* describes an ambivalent person as one "having conflicting feelings about something or one who is simultaneously attracted and repelled by something", *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* in a similar sense or conception describes an ambivalent person as one "having or showing mixed good and bad feelings about a particular object".

Precisely demonstrated, if Mr. 'A' has a strong desire to go swimming in order to cool down his body temperature when the weather is hot and at the same time condemns swimming or refrains from swimming because of the ill consequences of drowning associated with it, then he is ambivalent about swimming. He finds himself in a dilemma of conflicting interests or desire, which definitely could affect his action.

In the social sciences, we deal with human behaviour both in its social and cultural aspects or in general, human beings as members of the society. This raises the problem of whether we can apply scientific methods as against scientific theories/principles in the study of the society. Here there is need to emphasize that human beings in society are different from objects or facts found in the natural sciences. With the understanding of human beings as inexact entities and not obeying causal laws, we are compelled

to rely on the rules of operations and principles of sorting that is peculiarly applicable to questions/problems in the social sciences.

Apparently, the society as a system in which people live together in organized communities entails the design and reconstruction of the institutions that makes part of the society itself. Such institutions could be economic, education, politics, etc which directly or indirectly influences both individual and collective behaviour of the members of the society. The management and or control of these institutions cannot be overlooked in as much as it affects social action. It is pertinent at this juncture to assert that, in a society where these institutions/structures are absent, there is the urgent need for a design and construction, for they are the very fabric of the society and where they exist or had existed, there is need for a reconstruction either holistically or in parts to meet human need. This no doubt can be done through policy/decision-making and implementation as well as selfless- service.

Thus, in the social science the application of the engineering or technological approach in solving social problems imposes a discipline on our speculative inclination, which may lead us into the region of metaphysics. To avert this problem, the approach compels us to submit our theories to definite standards of clarity and practical testability. Prima facie, the engineering or technological approach implies the adoption of our activist attitude towards social order.

Human interest in social groupings are multifarious hence the difficulty to identify one interest at a time. There is also the difficulty in applying the scientific methods of the natural sciences in explaining and predicting social phenomena, since social behaviour defies causal laws and the exactness associated with the natural science. To a very large extent, we sometimes lack awareness of our multi-dimensional interest in a particular situation. Because of the ignorance of what we want at a particular time, which invariably affects our choice or decision-making, we are bound to have ambivalent interest; the consequence of which may be grave.

The double-capacity effect of our actions (willful) presupposes ignorance, which precedes our actions. Most time we are beclouded by selfishness and the natural tendency of man to have everything for himself. This kind of tendencies influences our social actions and could lead to ruthlessness in both private and public life. To remedy such a situation as the case may be, calls for urgent application of the right engineering techniques to the whole society. In this connection, the Nigeria experience is a case in point where there has been ill social policies and ruthlessness thus making both public and private life questionable.

To make this work more focused and precise, the work of Innocent. I, Asouzu titled: ***Effective Leadership and the Ambivalence of Human Interest: The Nigerian paradox in a complementary perspective***, is reviewed as a guide to our present work. It is nevertheless the subject matter of this paper. Here Asouzu identifies the phenomenon of ambivalence of human interest as something that can hold

individuals and societies to ransom because of its capacity to conceal its devastating effect. He notes further that because of the ambivalence of human interest, the life we choose to live sometimes is paradoxical especially when we identify certain situations as good but end up in the course of our actions doing those, which we recognize and even criticize as wrong.

What is Social Engineering?

Social engineering simply put, is theoretically a resemblance of physical engineering especially when we regard the ends as beyond the province of technology. To buttress the point, just as the main task of the physical engineer is to design machines and to remodel and service them, the task of the social engineer in comparative terms is to design social institutions, construct and reconstruct as well as run those already in existence. These include bodies of private and public character among other social institutions. Accordingly,

> The social sciences have developed largely
> through the criticism of proposals for social
> developments; or more precisely, through
> attempts to find out whether or not some
> particular economic or political action is likely
> to produce an expected or desired result
> (potter 418).

For example, the social engineer can investigate into the techniques of business administration; or into the effects of improved working conditions upon output. He can as well investigate into the effects of prison reform or health services or the stabilization of prices and even democratic reforms.

Writing on *Social science and social progress using Technological Approach*, Karl Popper claims with a degree of caution that the social engineer can generate knowledge, which is properly scientific. For Popper, this can form the basis of his highly favoured "piecemeal engineering". In this connection, Popper is of the view that the social science can be used as an aid to bring about reforms in the society. Importantly Popper rejects the claim that scientific technocratic thinking should become a substitute for moral and political debate. He opined that the social sciences and indeed the natural sciences can never tell us which goal we ought to pursue, but can tell us the technically most rational means of achieving whatever goals we choose to pursue. This can be reached through democracy as a social institution.

Dwelling on the piecemeal approach, the social engineer or technologist recognizes that only a minority of social institutions is consciously designed while the vast majority has just 'grown' as the

undesigned results of human action. The engineer relies on the functional or institutional point of view. Here he studies the differences in institutions as well as the similarities and expresses his result in the form of hypotheses.

In another vein and in agreement with Popper, social institutions are to be seen as fortresses and must be well designed and properly manned. Adopting the piecemeal approach in social engineering, we learn from our mistakes and make our way step by step and carefully comparing the results achieved. Thus the engineer tries to achieve his ends by small adjustments, which can be continually improved upon as against holistic adjustment. However, one need to point out here that such piecemeal approach or tinkering may not agree with the political temperament of many activists whose program is described as holistic or utopian engineering; and which is always of public character and aims at remolding the whole of society in accordance with a definite plan or blueprint.

The Concept of Ambivalence of Human Interest
and Rationalizing Social Action

As earlier mentioned, a review of Asouzu's work *Effective Leadership and the Ambivalence of Human Interest: The Nigerian Paradox in a Complementary Perspective*; will be an adequate guide for our understanding of the phenomenon of social action, and social construction/engineering relating to the ambivalence of human interest or 'double – capacity' effect of our action especially as it affects the Nigerian Social System as a case study. A thorough understanding of the work reveals that it is directed towards the discovering of the most fundamental sources of conflicts in society.

Precisely the book reflects on the reason behind our inability as human beings to do those things we identify as good but insist on doing those appalling things we vehemently abhor and criticize from the beginning (Asouzu 5). In other words, those things which people had earlier on abhorred and criticized informs the choice of the good things but along the line of social action, they become victims of the neglected.

The author identifies problems such as injustice, negligence, misadministration and disregard for the welfare of people as some of the attributes of the appalling actions in any society. He posits that all the problems inherent in a society are in strong terms as a result of our inability to recognize that human interest is ambivalent. This might not be far from Socrates' teaching that "knowledge is virtue" and vice is attributed to ignorance of that which is good. That human interest is ambivalent means it has a double capacity of representing something negative and positive at the same time. Little wonder the great philosopher Socrates in his social ethics admonished us to examine our lives and is known for the dictum "an unexamined life is not worth living". This may be informed by the need to be aware of our ambivalent

interest since ignorance for Socrates is vice and to be knowledgeable entails knowing the good and not the vice.

Thus the danger of inherent ambivalence is located in the capacity of our interest to mislead us to unintended but willful and insightful actions and conclusions. Here Asouzu gives a down to earth example to buttress his explanations of the phenomenon of ambivalent human interest as situated in Nigerian Social System. According to him; we sometimes willfully and insightfully accord recognition to a person of dubious character or antecedent thereby subscribing indirectly to the ill consequences associated with the person's lifestyle. Ironically when we become uncomfortable with the outcome of our actions especially with its threatening effects, we turn round to reject them. In this respect, I wish to state that besides our inability to be aware of the negative consequences of our actions from the start; our social actions are most often antecedented by greed and selfishness. The factor of greed, egoism or selfishness I presume beclouds or suppresses our rationality as humans. Socrates had cautioned that one should not allow his appetitive element of the soul to dominate the rational one that deciphers between virtues and vice. Here, the author with an emphasis points out that:

> If we were fully aware of the dangers associated
> with the ambivalence of our interest, we would
> certainly not sign our death warrant; we would
> vehemently resist those things that will complicate
> matter later and put as into trouble (Asouzu 6).

Based on the general premise that human beings have fundamental natural tendency to survive, Asouzu further notes that if we singly or collectively had those acts that would cause our destruction, it means we have failed to adequately identify those acts as dangerous. This sounds more of Socratic teachings because were we to identify them as dangerous and capable of bringing about our own destruction, we would not have chosen them. Thus, it is plausible to add that the awareness of the ills of our actions in the society affords us the rational privilege of choosing that side of our interest that would augur well with our survival instincts.

Addressing social actions in relation to the ambivalence of interest, the case of the suicide bomber is critically examined as an example. Here, the action of the suicide bomber could be viewed as having altruistic goal or as Asouzu puts it something positive. Besides the achievement of its positive goal which was willfully carried out for the good of the society as preconceived, the negative out come which could possibly be averted if critically examined entails the bomber killing himself and in most cases people who

might be sympathizers of his course. Here the bomber may infuriate both his enemies and friends for a retaliation.

He may equally cause members of his family and friends pains in the heart for destroying himself especially where they value him. In this circumstance, one notes that the ambivalence of human interest makes the suicide bomber to fail to realize that there are alternatives and more positive ways of addressing the same problem that informed the bombing.

According to Asouzu; "It is the lack of adequate awareness concerning the phenomenon of ambivalence of human interest that makes us to choose wrongly" (7).

Thus, rationalizing our social actions entails adequate awareness of the ambivalence of our interest, which would make us to put up spirited efforts to avoid those things that we would actually never desire even if they touch on our most cherished personal interest. Stressing the point above, the author notes that: "The moment a person is not aware of the double capacity of his interests this person easily becomes a victim of error of judgment and his actions, in worse cases, can have tragic consequences." (7)

Inferring from the above, there is need for a rational approach to the way we conceptualize reality and contentious situations in our society or social life. This includes making our interest/action part of the whole of society.

Rationalizing Social Action

Rationalizing our social action entails a critical review of every intended act by means of reflection. An action that results to negative consequence it presupposes the lack of critical reflection or rationality. Thus to be rational in respect of social action include among others:

1) An inquiring into the preceding conditions of possibility for rational or irrational human action. This is similar to the root of contradictions and paradoxes in society.

2) Of great importance is the principle of complementarism, which to a very large extent bears on the thematic. Constitutive of this principle are:

        (a)   Principles of harmonious complementation and

(b)   Principles of progressive transformation.

These principles as noted by Asouzu help us to rise above the constraints imposed by the ambivalence of our interest and the fact of our historicity. Fundamental to the operation of these principles is the methodological assumption that anything that exists serves a missing link of reality. Reality here is conceived in the Hegelian way that is, in absolutism and this apparently enables us to come to terms with our finality and limitations. In other words we consciously accept them (limitations) as given and at the same time see them as conditions through which we can achieve higher levels of legitimization. With the

notion of the totality of our being where everything that exists serves as missing link of reality, the principles enable us "to focus on the authentic joy that is intended in every fragmented moments of existence" (Asouzu 8). Asouzu adds that once the fragmented moments of existence can be transformed to those conditions that make a fulfilled happy life a possibility; they become veritable conditions towards overcoming the ambivalence of human interest.

It is pertinent to mention here that the authentic foundation of human interest is or should be linked with all world common goods accepted both as a theoretical or practical reality. Considering the foregoing, there is the ontological precondition of human interest, which can be used in adequately evaluating the practical situations of everyday life. Any act of personal interest is a detachment from the authentic foundation – the common good and from the transcendental precondition, which is a contradiction in itself. Accordingly, Asouzu submits, "… any society that insists on the canon of self-interest as means of personal and collective self-actualization is merely heading to ruins, chaos or anarchy" (8). To avoid such a chaotic or anarchistic society, argument is advanced for a reconciliation of our interest with each in a manner that makes them harmoniously complementary in view of their ultimate legitimizing foundation. This harmonious complementarism yields the common good postulated as the authentic foundation of all human interest and is symmetrically related to the authenticating foundation of all world immanent common good.

Finally in any society where social action is precedented by the ambivalence of human interest, calls for the creation of an awareness concerning the ambivalence which plausibly stated turns out to be one of the greatest challenges towards building a just, equitable, harmonious, democratic and violence – free society. This entails a new orientation in personal character reformation as it affects all facets of social life.

The Nigerian Experience of the Ambivalence of Human Interest and Social Engineering

Suffice it to say that, the objectification of the total realities of human existence as it affects the entire social system in which man has found himself involves the articulation of the many facets of social reality into a holistic manner that can be coordinated and controlled for the overall benefit of members of the society otherwise expressed as the common good (Ozumba 1). These facets of social reality include social institutions or structures like economic, culture, political, religious, environmental, legal and psychological elements of the society.

All the foregoing social forces among others seek expression in man's interaction with others in society. The articulation of law, government and other legitimate agencies is necessitated by a proper control and temper of their varying expressions. However, it is critically noted that the application of the

forces of control to human action is not practicable in the absolute sense. Human action in the Nigerian Society is very largely precedented by the ambivalence of human interest.

Reviewing the effect of the ambivalence of human interest in Nigeria, Asouzu expresses that though Nigerians are hypothetically not known for violent crimes, they however indulge in clever crimes such as "419" example credit card swindle, forgery, impersonation, counterfeiting and adulteration with a highly refined and elegant versions. Crimes and criminals are common features of every human society, its civilization and industrialization notwithstanding. However, suffice it to say that the Nigerian experience in this connection is a peculiarity because, as Asouzu puts it, the romanticisation of the idea of being a crook is described thus: "Being a crook in the Nigerian way is a phenomenon that evokes disgust, amusement and bewilderment all over the world" (10).

A practical example of the effect of the ambivalence of human interest in Nigerian society is the dangers that substandard products and services might pose to human life. Here manufacturers in Nigeria indulge in the production of fake goods with a view of selfishly making profits. What informs the production of low quality products is the selfish interest in profit making.

This no doubt has devastating consequences to human life especially in drugs and food beverages. Recently the National Agency for Food and Drug Control (NAFDAC) has been fighting a big battle against the perpetrators of this heinous crime who are "more interested in their personal interest and this has almost characterized our life style: Starting from the private sector to the big co-operate undertakings the story is almost the same" (Asouzu 11).

Equally human services or labour is not left out. Civil servants as well as private or public servants render services that are not commensurate with what they earn. The mason, carpenter, and other social services providers are more interested in the unfair share of the gain they are likely to make and not in the excellence of the work. Poor quality materials are often used especially in the execution of public project predicated on the interest of unjust profit making. The ill consequence from this ambivalent human interest ranges from the destruction of individual lives like in the case of a collapsed public building that was poorly finished to economic waste or sabotage having negative effect on both the perpetrators of crime and the innocent ones including their families and loved ones that were never targeted.

Another case in point is that of politicians and those privileged to be in the corridors of power. Bernard Williams writing on *politics and moral character* in Stuart Hampshire (editor) makes a general comment about politicians. According to Williams:

There is of course one totally banal sense of the claim that
they (politicians) are crooks, namely that some break the
law for their own advantage, take bribes, do shady things

which are not actually illegal for personal gain.
…. It does raise one or two interesting questions, for
instance the absence from politics of any very robust
notion of professional ethics. (Hampshire 56).

I will not hesitate to quickly state that Bernard Williams has succinctly summarized the attitude of the Nigerian politicians who run public offices and politics, as business enterprises or cartel. Here the politician and even the Nigerian citizens to a large extent perceive the politician's professional conduct as more like that of a businessman.

In Nigeria it is a common phenomenon to observe that a morally right politician or public servant who has respect for professional ethics or law but, comes home after serving his mother land without booties of looting and fraudulent wealth is often wooed and perceived as a failure by members of his family, friends and neighbours. Here the ambivalence of human interest is inherent in both the "common man" and the highly placed. Both suffer directly or indirectly the negative consequence of their ambivalent interest via action.

In another manner it is common in Nigeria for people to occupy public offices without the required qualification and some out of selfish interest tell lies, or deliberately bully others and mislead them, or let them down, or use them as the case may be. However it may be that when it is all explained, the people understand, but it is foolish to say, even then, that they (the victims) have no right to complain. Williams here opines that:

It may be said that the victims do not have a right
to complain because their relation to the action is
not the same in the political context as it would be
outside it: perhaps it is not even the same action….
There are victims outside it who get worst than
they could reasonably expect. (62).

Emphatically it is much better to be adequately aware of the ambivalence of human interest when making political decision.

Public crimes in Nigeria are in most cases modestly committed especially where individuals involved are insulated. Writing on *Ruthlessness in public life*, Thomas Nagel in Hampshire (editor) aptly portrays the Nigerian experience in his general comment. According to Nagel:

> … the growth of political power has introduced a scale of Massacre and despoliation that makes the efforts of private criminals, pirates, and bandits seem truly modest. Individuals who play roles in political, military, and economic institutions commit public crimes. Yet unless the offender has the originality of Hitler, Stalin or Amin, the crimes don't seem to be fully attributable to the individual himself. Famous political monsters have moral personalities large enough to transcend the boundaries of their public roles, they take on the full weight of their deeds as personal moral property…. They act as officeholder or functionaries, and thereby as individuals they are insulated in a puzzling way from what they do; insulated both in their own view and in the view of most observers. Even if one is in no doubt about the merits of the acts in question, the agents seem to have a slippery moral surface produced by their roles or offices (Hampshire 75).

One would not fail to react that whether a public office-holder is insulated by political or public circumstances or not, the consequences of his ambivalent interest may not spare him directly or indirectly.

Asouzu argues in this respect that fundamental confidence, which is the basis of human cohabitation, is almost a scarce commodity within the Nigerian context. The question is how many people are willing to place the common good above their private interest? For many people, leadership in Nigeria today is measured figuratively stated by the number of sacks of money that exchange hands during a person's tenure in office. Also in the Nigerian context, a good leader is one who creates conducive atmosphere for the unregulated and unaccounted for distribution of public fund and assets. Ironically when this act brings about the collapse of the entire economy or polity, both the fraudulent leader and innocent ones become victims of such an ambivalence of human interest directly or indirectly.

Conclusion

It is paradoxically observed that a person seeks to conserve his interest by embarking on those things that would ensure his own destruction. This apparently is the root of the problem of the ambivalence of human interest as is shared by the Nigerian experience. One would agree that in the Nigerian experience,

the failure to realize that an ambivalent approach to life and the desire to accomplish selfish interest are contrary and as such not practicable. This has become the root cause of most of the problems the Nigerian society faces.

In a manner that proffers solution to ambivalent interest, Asouzu admonishes that a life built on contradictions breeds a poverty of a special type. It breeds poverty of the spirit and poverty of the spirit reinforces all forms of deviant behaviours.

The Nigerian society as a whole need a therapeutic exercise that entails a non-violent social revolution rather a social reorientation; a measure that would definitely remove the vail from our eyes and create adequate awareness of the negative consequences of our actions either in private or public life. The canon or dogma that, "ascendance to any public office … is a sure way to instant affluence" (Asouze 17) must of necessity be eliminated from our society.

Stuart Hampshire writing on *public and private morality* recommends that:

> The trade – off between antithetical values would then
> be the pursuit of an Aristotelian balance, an intuitive
> moral compromise that repudiates two extremes on
> either side. The Aristotelian balance between public
> and private life, with their attached virtues, and
> between practical and theoretical interests, is a feature
> of that particular way of life (45).

Besides the Aristotelian balance, we must consciously and practically cease from the choice of doing those things we abhor and criticize. This will in the end justify our actions both morally and socially. As Nigerians, we precisely must in the course of rationalizing our social action and engineering veritable society for human habitation, desist from the act of corruption especially in high places, mismanagement of public funds and property.

Conclusively there is need for an adequate awareness of the negative consequences of our social actions couple with the integration of our being with the total reality or absolute being. Thus once we can identify adequately the ambivalence of our human interest and the danger of self-destruction inherent in it then we can build a peaceful and habitable society for humanity. For no man would want to deliberately and consciously destroy himself.

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