


An Ontological enquiry into the Anatomy of Dispute, Conflict and Violence in Contemporary Africa

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Abstract

This work is a philosophical analysis of the phenomenon of dispute, conflict and violence in contemporary Africa. There is no doubt that our world today is generally afflicted, confronted and challenged by various forms of dispute, conflict, violence and wars—civil or international wars. In this, Africa is not exempted; for there are various forms of dispute, conflicts and violence in many countries of Africa—East, West, North and South. Efforts have been made from diverse quarters to arrive at the possible causative factor(s) of this phenomenon of violence—culturally, socially, psychologically, commercially and even technically. Unfortunately, none has come from the ontological angle. The ontological side is one side of the general philosophical approaches. However, it is the most challenging of all because it involves going into the metaphysics of the problem. Based on this therefore, this paper is an attempt to go beyond the empirical conclusions of experimental sciences on the phenomenon of conflict and violence that based their findings solely on empirical researches. To achieve this, the work adopts the thoughts of some leading philosophers on conflict and violence. The method of the work is analytic. Its conclusion is that although dispute, conflict or violence appears inevitable in human affairs as it seems to be an inherent deficiency in human nature burdened with many needs but with little or slender resources to meet them, certain principles are possible to make humans overcome them.

Key words: Anatomy, Conflict, Dispute, Ontology, Violence

Introduction

There are various ways of looking at the phenomenon of dispute, conflict or violence in contemporary Africa, namely culturally, socially, psychologically, commercially and even technically; but the most challenging of all seems to be the ontological. The ontological way is one side of the general philosophical ways. However, it is the most challenging of all because of the manner it acknowledges and analyzes the problem within the general philosophical discipline. Also, it is the most challenging because it hinges on the issues imbued in the philosophical compositions of objectivity and subjectivity, individuality and universality, human consciousness and action, body and soul, human history and substance, the phenomenological and metaphysical experiences of the human being within all diametric of ethics and existence (Amaku, 2009). Given this backdrop, this work attempts a metaphysical analysis of the phenomenon of conflict and violence in contemporary Africa.

Clarification of Terms

On a general note, every violence starts with a dispute; hence the Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary defines dispute as a disagreement, an argument about something; it is a situation of argument or debate about the meaning of something. A dispute can lead to quarrel or heated debates because positions and issues are contested, and people may have various views about the fact of a situation, and disagreement about the how it can be managed or handled. In dispute, views are challenged, and people make claims and counter-claims about what the issue is all about. Although the ultimate goal of dispute seems to be that people are searching for and arguing about how to convince or win people to their views/sides or negotiate their meaning structures (Njoku 2014), a dispute can degenerate or lead to conflict.

A conflict is a serious disagreement about something. It is also an argument; a struggle; a fight; a clash. The Cambridge Dictionary says it is ‘an active disagreement between people with opposition of opinions or principles.’ The essence of conflict seems to be disagreement, contradiction, or incompatibility; hence conflict refers to any situation in which there are incompatible goals, cognitions, or emotions within or between individuals or groups that lead to opposition or antagonistic interaction. When conflict occurs, violence is likely to occur equally.

Violence, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica, is an act of physical force that causes or is intended to cause harm. The damage inflicted by violence may be physical, emotional/psychological, or both. However, violence may be distinguished from aggression. It is a more general type of hostile behavior that may be physical, verbal, or passive in nature. However, violence is of different kinds: physical, emotional, political, religious, cultural etc but all seem to originate from one source—dispute.

In summary, not all dispute can lead to conflict and not all conflict can lead to violence or war. However, a conflict that leads to violence depends on whether the conflict is a positive or negative conflict. A positive conflict is one in which there is a struggle and sacrifice to get at ends (competition); and a negative conflict is one in which there is an upsetting state of affairs signaling that a dispute has degenerated into conflict. Conflict does not exist because people disagree as to how to negotiate each other’s meaning structure or method of claims, but only when it generates mistrust of undefined or undifferentiated ends in an arena where there was previous trust and confidence. In other words, it is a breakdown of trust. Onigu Otite (1999) captures this rightly when he says that conflict arises from the pursuit of divergent interests, goals and aspirations by individuals and, or groups in defined social and physical environment.

State of Africa in Cotemporary Time and Government’s Effort at Classifying Conflicts

Africa, like most other continents of the world, is contemporaneously ravaged, challenged and afflicted by all manner of dispute, conflict and violence. The most of them all is physical violence which include political violence as well. There is no single region or country of Africa today, whether in the East, West, North or South that is not witnessing one form of physical violence—political, economic, religious or the other. It is no more a debate that there are more of political violence—armed conflicts and crisis in Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad, Niger, Ivory Coast, Cameroun, Egypt, South Africa, Tunisia, Nigeria, South Sudan, North Sudan, Togo, Ghana,

Mozambique, Senegal, Congo, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, and Liberia etc.

In Nigeria, there have been efforts from government to classify and address this phenomenon of conflict and violence. For instance, in October 2002, there was a mandate from the government to the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR) to make a study about the early warnings of conflicts and develop a preventive systems and good support base for those engaged in mediation and conflict resolution. The agency conducted its study and made recommendations to the Federal government and states and bodies and communities. It produced the *Strategic Conflict Assessment in Nigeria: Consolidated Report*. In its general finding, the Report found four major sources of conflict ‘on the interaction between resource competition and the corruption of the political systems; that 30 years of military dictatorship of Nigeria’s 42 years existence undermined social and political values; and subsequently, Nigeria’s turning to democracy in 1999 has not resolved or dissolved all conflicts already present in her blood streams as a nation. The report further noted that there are many conflicts in Nigeria that spread all over the six geo-political zones. Njoku (2014) articulates the IPCR’s Report and broad classifications of conflict under the following headings:

1. Security-related manifestation of conflict (proliferation of arms; corruption of law-enforcement agents like the police and the military that involve themselves in crimes caused ‘by low moral and poor condition of services,’ vigilante groups, which turn to political thuggery to abuse citizens and destroy property; foreign mercenaries and international tensions that infiltrate Nigeria through her border states; misuse of military responses: ‘the deployment of military to suppress conflicts without addressing underlying issues may exacerbate conflict further. The impunity of military personal may cause deeper grievance in the case of Benue.
2. Political manifestation of Conflicts (political conflicts or struggles within the political class, which range from politicians’ selfishness to citation of local government headquarters, party issues, tensions between governors and deputies, between state government and federal government, between politicians and their sponsors/godfathers, successions and dethronement conflicts and government involvement and manipulation and territorial disputes, which drag for years.
3. Economic manifestation of conflict (poverty and inequality in Nigeria social life; resources competition—dividing the benefits from oil, hence the allocation of Nigeria’s wealth generates conflict because of its uneven allocation; resource competition over land—who has access to the land in dispute

(Nigeria or Cameroun? For instance) unequal development, and market competition).

4. Social manifestation of Conflicts (ethnic and communal conflicts, religious conflicts, unemployed youths, women as victims of domestic violence; breakdown of social values because of patterns of change in society and the inability of many families to live up to their responsibilities
5. Psycho-cultural dispositions...etc. (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2002).

The Philosopher's Contribution: The Ontological Analysis

The ontological analysis of dispute, conflict and violence, in our context, takes off from Thomas Hobbes' ontological status of dispute, conflict and violence. There is a consensus of opinion that one of the most leading philosophers who have tried to give answer to the problem of dispute, conflict or violence from an ontological perspective, although using a social/structural spectrum, was Thomas Hobbes (1981). Hobbes' exposition was based on what he termed an inherent deficiency in human nature such that for him, conflict or violence is grounded in the human quest for survival and self-preservation. According to him, nature has burdened man with many needs economically but with little or slender resources to meet them; hence people fight over material needs. For a clear understanding of Hobbes, it is important to present Hobbes' descriptive picture of how the quest to satisfy one's passion can lead to dispute, conflict and violence (war) in human society. Thus a review of Hobbes' state of nature, for example, vividly makes this possible.

According to Hobbes, fundamentally, dispute, conflict and violence exist in human nature as a tendency for self-preservation. Just as he says, the original state of nature in which man originally found himself was a state where the only 'rational' thing to do was to go after one's passion and damn the consequence. It is in the process to achieve this, according to Hobbes that collision of desires and interests exist which eventually lead to conflict, war, anarchy and violence.

Again, it is important to recall that Hobbes lived at a time when widespread warfare raged throughout Europe. It was the wars of religion in the sixteenth century and the Thirty years' war in the seventeenth which was particularly bloody. Hobbes was also a witness to a great upheaval in English political life, where parliamentary armies rose up against, and overthrew Charles I.

Given this background, the idea that life without a strong central authority would result in a 'war of all against all' was not difficult for him to imagine. Hence Hobbes set out to unravel what he termed the fundamental cause of conflict and violence

in human society. Hobbes was both a mechanist and a materialist. By this, he believed that natural phenomena were made up (only) of physical elements that functioned according to deterministic laws of cause and effect. For him, human beings were not exempted from this law. Nor were their voluntary actions. Hence, he argues that voluntary movement (what he called 'animal motion) was caused by external impact of some force on the senses proceeding to internal motions that are either helped (pleasure) or hindered (pain) issuing eventually (or not) in external movement.

Hobbes' insistence that animal motion was caused by external factors led him to the conclusion that humans are fundamentally selfish. He called this principle of action in man (self-interest) the principle of psychological egoism, which is a descriptive claim that, as a matter of psychological fact, the fundamental motive for all human beings is self-interest.

Hobbes does not think man can live without going after what pleases him. For him, in the fact that, although people sometimes appear to act to serve the interest of others or take others concern into account, their ultimate aim is to advance their own interest, treating the satisfaction of others' needs as purely instrumental in the final accomplishment of their own goals.

Given these inevitable conflicts of desires among individuals, Hobbes believed there would be constant violence and danger, for all would do what they could to accomplish their own goals and naturally encounter others of equal power doing the same, against every man. This situation, according to Hobbes, leads to a state he famously called a 'warre...of every man, against every man' where life would be solitary, poor, brutish, and short.'

Furthermore, since it is Hobbes' recognition that man is fundamentally acting always for his own self-interest, and only act in other's interest as a result of social convention—laws, social practices, rules of behavior—backed up by formal and informal sanctions, it means therefore that dispute, conflict or violence is a result of breakdown of law and order. That is to say, that without law and order and its resultant sanctions in the face of disobedience, people would have no immediate motive not to willfully pursue their own aims. In other words, they would have enjoyed same level of power to accomplish their aims since no person or group of person would like to allow himself to be dominated by others.

On this backdrop, Hobbes did not hesitate to conclude that dispute, conflict or violence are all evidence of human struggle for survival. They are struggle over values or over what people consider valuable in their lives, cultures and communities; and

in going the way of conflict people express their needs, thereby affirming their autonomy. Thus, a particular situation of conflict is designated or defined with reference to the objective or goals that feature in the contestation. The conflict situation can be very precarious and slippery because what each part considers very objective may not be seen in the same light by another, who may see him/her as exaggerating his/her points of view. Given this conviction, J.S. Mill (1991) argues that the principles that men profess on any controverted subject are usually a very imperfect exponent of the opinions they really hold.

Beyond Hobbes' Analysis: The Power-Violence Dimension

Following Hobbes' contention is the view that conflict and violence are nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power (C. Wright, 1956). For Wright, the ultimate kind of power is violence and by consequence, power is the source of violence. Max Weber also corroborates this view when he defines the state as the rule of men over men based on the means of legitimate; that is allegedly legitimate, violence. Here what is meant is that all politics is a struggle for power; hence the state is an instrument of suppression in the hands of the ruling class. The state involves the body politics, its laws and institutions. And all these stand as coercive superstructures, secondary manifestations of some underlying forces. Bertrand de Jouvenel (1952) further contends that to him who contemplates the unfolding of the ages, war presents itself as an activity of States which pertains to their essence. Thus power is an instrument of rule, where rule owes its existence to the instinct of domination.

Jean Paul Sartre also says that it is violence when a man feels himself more of a man when he is imposing himself and making others the instruments of his will, which causes him incomparable pleasure. And for Voltaire, power consist in making others act as one chooses. Acting as one chooses amounts to violence because power is present wherever one has the chance to assert his own will against the resistance of others. It is an inborn instinct of domination and an innate aggressiveness in the humans as well as other wild animals. On this backdrop, Clausewitz (1954) concludes that war is an act of violence to compel the opponent to do as one wishes.

How Hobbes' Idea and Power-Violence Relation fit into Contemporary African Experience

Here are how Hobbes' view on inherent deficiency in the human nature and the power-violence relation prove to be a manifestation of dispute, conflict and violence in contemporary

Africa. The following are the by-products of this lacuna in the human nature:

First and foremost, the Nigerian nation, as it is today, remains a British manipulated clone. This manipulated amalgamation of various ethnic groups or autonomous nations, with different cultures and aspirations was based on the selfish interest of an occupying power—Britain. Although, this forceful coming together shows that Nigeria ab-initio was destined to sit on crisis because, there was no general agreement by the various groups in question to come together except that they were dragged and fused together by Britain through power-violence. This is the reason why up to day, there have been several attempts, passion and desire by some of these amalgamated groups to separate and live their separate lives but this has not been possible as political power of violence is always unleashed to any group that aims and tries to force itself out from this amalgamation. The Biafra agitation, for example, is a wonderful case study; and that of Oduduwa Republic, Arewa Republic, Niger/Delta Republic etc.

Again, at the economic level, there is a wanton display of deficiency as shown in the allocation of Nigeria's wealth—in its uneven allocation; resource competition over land—who has access to land and what may. Truly, as Hobbes says, nature has burdened man with many needs but with little or slender resources to meet them. Thus, conflict and violence are fights over material needs. There is no doubt about this. Experience of frustration in Nigeria produces a tendency for one to attack others. The imbalance in the lives of some Nigerian persons and groups have been proved to be a source of tension, and ultimately conflict or violence; leading to the emergence of the civil war in some cases.

The military intervention in most African countries is also a proof that most political conflict and violence in most African countries are as a result of the lacuna/deficiency in human nature and the quest for power. In Nigeria, for instance, the crisis brought about by constant military command, power and rule by force are still invading the Nigerian psyche. One may argue that for some time now that the military, apparently, have relinquished power; however, they still manipulate the state because they use their wealth, gotten by force, to perpetuate their own interests in sponsoring their favored candidates or 'boys'.

Ethnic chauvinism is another indication that conflict and violence are outcome of a lacuna and deficiency in human nature and quest for power. Ethnic chauvinism entails people's inability to outgrow ethnic suspicions, which take place when people in government and places of authority scandalously encourage groups and individuals to discriminate against others along ethnic lines through divisive religious attitudes and other social prejudice and

biases (Arendt, 1969). There is no doubt however that there have been situations where adherents of particular religious denomination war against each other, and this makes it very difficult for one to live in harmony in a place where one may kill in the name of God/Allah or discriminate against one another on account of some kind of presumed self-justifying sanctity. In his *Tribalism: A Pragmatic Instrument for National Unity*, Azikiwe (1964) seriously talked about how to transform tribal instincts into pragmatic tools for national co-existence of all groups, for the varieties in the tribal groups make for enriching communion. Ethnic chauvinism indicates therefore that the human nature is limited, deficient and the quest and crave for satisfaction leads to dispute, conflict and violence.

Furthermore, ethnic chauvinism could lead to divisive religious attitudes, social prejudice and bias among religious faithful, where one particular religious attitude is forced upon every other persons. Issue of political thuggery in the Nigeria's politics has also been singled out as a big sign of this inherent manifestation of deficiency in human nature causing conflict and violence. For instance, Pius Okigbo (1993) is of the view that political crisis started in Nigeria between 1964 and 1965 with the emergence of violence and thuggery in Nigerian politics. According to him, the second crisis that hit the Nigerian nation, just barely six years after independence, was the civil war that occurred between 1969 and 1970, and this cast slur on our moral values and conviction. E.S. Simpson (1987) corroborated the above view by saying that the war has been explained in terms of the dispute over Nigeria's new oil wealth but to explain Biafra's secession and the war to re-incorporate it in terms of conflict over oil is too facile. It was more deeply rooted in political maneuvering within a new country and the manifest unevenness of opportunity amongst her people.

Having said this, it is clear that in Africa today and Nigeria in particular, conflict and violence exist as manifestation of the quest to resolve this lacuna in human nature seen as a deficiency. In the ICPR report shown above, analysis from the report shows that political conflict has deep relation with government's inefficiency. Amadi (2021) affirms this by saying that a surge of violence last year in both Burkina Faso and Mali underscored the fragility of the governments in both countries. And Allison (2022) also argues that the violence in Guinea Bissau is because the President Alpha Conde appears to be angling to extend his time in office.

Towards a Conflict and Violence-Free Society: The Gains of the Ontological Discussion

If human nature is imperfectly structured in such manner that dispute, conflict and violence are mere manifestations, according to Hobbes, it follows therefore that human nature is predisposed to completion. Hobbes says that at the state of nature, what is 'rational' is what the individual naturally aims at. But since everyone aims at one thing at the same time, dispute, conflict and violence are bound to ensue because there is scarce material to satiate everyone's desires. Therefore, since the ultimate desire in the state of nature is self-preservation, it means then that certain rules or order are deemed necessary for the preservation of this life. No doubt, Hobbes calls this introduction of rules in the state of nature the transformation of the state of nature into civil society. However, for this transformation to be effective, certain principles must be considered necessary; namely, the principle of common good; the principle of solidarity and the principle of subsidiarity.

The principle of common good is clearly contained in Aristotelian politics when he says that man is a social and political being. According to him, common good stands as the shared objective for the basis of co-operation among members of the civil society (Njoku, 2002). It is equally the end or objective for associating together. In a political community, common good is a set of conditions which enables the members of a community to attain for themselves reasonable objectives, or to realize reasonably for themselves value(s) for the sake of which they have reason to collaborate with each other (positively or negatively) in a community namely justice and peace among others. Common good therefore exists because society exists for human nature with its needs and capacity for completion in the attainment of full humanity.

Following from the principle of common good is the principle of solidarity, which flows from that firm moral and social attitude that preserves a positive determination to commit oneself to the common good. It is sustained on the basis of a growing awareness of individuals and nations that there is a spirit of interdependence that is at the basis of their flourishing as individuals and communities. Aristotle believes that interdependence implies a network of relations involving economic, cultural, political, social and moral categories. And as Austin (1964) would say, the principle of solidarity is necessary if society based on the attainment of common good must survive.

By logic of deduction, Finnis (1980) says that the principle of subsidiarity is required for the existence of a sustained society poised for the realization of its end—the common good. Thus, by function, the principle of subsidiarity claims that “responsibilities and competencies only fall to the state to the extent that the members of society, on their own resources and on their own responsibilities, are not capable of fulfilling the essential purpose founded in the

existential ends. This means that the superior community should recognize, protect, and stimulate the activities of the lesser communities whenever necessary, Njoku (2002). This principle is founded basically on the dignity and autonomy of the human person and the autonomy of the minor society in the context of the major society.

The above three mentioned principles are part of the organizing functions of rationality which Hobbes says transformed the state of nature that was characterized by selfishness, leading to dispute, conflict and violence to a state of civility. Jonathan Barnes (1982) affirms that what is specifically peculiar to men leaving the state of nature to a civilized state is that they alone can perceive the good and the bad, the just and the unjust, and the rest—and it is in partnership with these that makes a household and a state. Njoku (2000) sustains this view with the fact that with ‘rationality’ and in association with one another, man can discern the good and the bad in social organization, and find better ways of complementing each other in the pursuit of a common well-being. On this backdrop therefore, if human intentions, pursuits and goals are the building blocks of socio-political reality, then it must be admitted that there must be frictions in forms of dispute, conflict and violence any time those principles are neglected.

Conclusion

The theme of this discussion is an enquiry into the anatomy of dispute, conflict and violence in contemporary Africa. This enquiry is not like any other kind of enquiry. Its difference lies in the fact that beyond looking at the issue at hand from the cultural, socio-economic, religious, psychological or technical perspectives, this paper chose to investigate the phenomenon of dispute, conflict and violence from a deeper ontological perspective. The ontological analysis or examination exposes the writer to a more fundamental causes of dispute, conflict and violence in contemporary Africa. It shows that dispute, conflict and violent incidents are often deeply rooted in the ontology of man, which is fundamentally connected with the pursuit of his self-interest. According to Thomas Hobbes, the quest for the satisfaction of self-interest principle is responsible for dispute, conflict and violence in every human society but especially in Africa. There is no doubt that all over Africa and beyond, dispute, conflict and violence have permeated all regions causing one form of disaffection and the other. Although, there have been attempts to attribute the cause(s) of dispute, conflict or violence in human affairs to bad governance, military intervention, ethnic chauvinism etc, it is first and foremost, the resultant effect of the principle of self-interest in man that craves for satisfaction. Human beings crave for self-preservation in the state of nature. By logic of this assertion,

some principles are naturally necessary for its realization, and above all, for a dispute, conflict and violent-free society. These are principle of common good, which stands as the shared objective for the basis of co-operation among members of the civil society; solidarity, which flows from that firm moral and social attitude that preserves a positive determination to commit oneself to the common good. It is sustained on the basis of a growing awareness of individuals and nations that there is a spirit of interdependence that is at the basis of their flourishing as individuals and communities and subsidiarity, which is required for the existence of a sustained society poised for the realization of its end—the common good. It is against this backdrop that the conclusion of this paper is that it is only when these principles are obeyed and respected can a dispute, conflict and violent-free society be made possible in human affairs.

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