

ON THE SOCIAL NATURE OF EXISTENCE

Rainier R.A. Ibana, PhD*

The Social nature of existence is derived from the intrinsic orientation of beings to other beings. Such an orientation naturally forms communal bonds. Being means being with, to be is to be related. According to contemporary physics, even the most basic entity exhibits a pulsating energy that reaches out to others (PW). Our everyday lives also point to the reality of mutual interdependence. The solitary act of writing, for example, is dependent on words that have been passed on to various generations, on technologies thought out by others, on the presupposition that the written text will somehow be understood by readers. St. Thomas confirms the social nature of human existence in his treatise "On Princely Government" (OPG) :

When we consider all that is necessary to human life, however, it becomes clear that man is naturally a social and political animal, destined more than all other animals to live in community one man alone would not be able to furnish himself with all that is necessary, for no one man's resources are adequate to the fullness of human life (Ch. 1).

The degree of social complexity, however, is proportional to the intensity of a being's existence. The most intensive form of existence, therefore, is the most extensively related. The lower forms of being are the most isolated.

Solidarity

The principle of solidarity, which is at the heart of Catholic social teachings, is confirmed by the Thomist doctrine of sociality:

The higher the form of existence, the more developed becomes the relatedness to reality, also the more profound and comprehensive becomes the sphere of this relatedness; namely, the world. And the deeper such relations penetrate the world of reality, the more intrinsic becomes the subjects' existence (PBE 45).

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People in positions of authority, for example, are burdened by responsibility precisely because of the scope of their relationships. The extent of their responsibility compels them to live a more profound life of interiority if they are not to be dispersed by the pressing demands of their jobs. People in responsible positions are often driven to pray so that they may become faithful to the vocations that they have been called to perform. Complex relationships create potential conflicts that require resolution on a higher and deeper point of view.

St. Thomas recognizes the fullness of life in more complex forms of community.

There is indeed a certain sufficiency in the family of one household, so far as the elementary necessities of nutrition and procreation and such like are concerned. Similarly in one locality you may find all that is necessary in particular trade or calling. In a city, however, there is a perfect community, providing all that is necessary for the fullness of life; and in a province, we have an even better example, because in this case, there is added the mutual assistance of allies against hostile attack (OPG Ch.1).

Within our contemporary global context, we may extend St. Thomas' medieval context to include cosmopolitan cities like Naga where the amenities of communications and computer technologies are readily available. These technologies allow us to communicate with the rest of the world instantaneously. The problem with modernity, however, is that it has mediated our relationships through alienating social institutions that rob us of our initial intersubjective relationships.

Friendship In the Common Good

While we can no longer go back to a pre-modern world where inter-human relationships are still personalized, we can still find friends amidst our modern social institutions. St. Thomas advises that :

Particularly, there is nothing on this earth to be preferred before true friendship. For friendship unites those who are virtuous and helps them to preserve and strengthen their virtue. We, all of us, whatever our task in life, have need of it; steadfast alike in good times and in bad. Friendship is the source of the greatest pleasures, and without friends even the most agreeable pursuits become tedious. Love makes things which are difficult easy and almost unworthy of note (OPG Ch. X).

It is important to have friends in our pursuits. The most successful among my students are those who have friends whom they can rely on in good and bad times. They not only enrich each other in their careers. Their friendships lighten the burdens of life to make it bearable. We, Filipinos, for example, have the tendency to do our tasks in groups: through our *barkadas*, *kabayanihan*, and other cooperative endeavors. Those who do things by themselves are labeled as "K.J." or social outcasts that could even be mistaken as witches and queers.

Working in groups, however, could lead to vices if they are not tempered by their orientation to the common good. St. Thomas tells us :

For if a great number of people were to live, each intent only upon his own interests, such a community would surely disintegrate unless there were one of its number to have a care for the common good; just as the body of a man or an animal would disintegrate were there not in the body itself a single controlling force, sustaining the general vitality in all the members (*Ibid.*, Bk. 1).

Tyranny is short-lived precisely because it contradicts itself. The more it privatizes the commonweal, the more it becomes divided within itself. Greed cannot become a universal principle because it can be readily canceled by more greed. And if someone emerges among the people who espouses the common good, he or she is supported by others to topple the tyrant (*Ibid.*). Good government, on the other hand, survives precisely because of the peace and order that is the result of maintaining the good of the community. The common good provides the cement that binds social relationships.

The Dynamism of Social Institutions

Associations are formed when two or more persons come together on the basis of shared interests. Contracts are designed on the basis of mutual benefits and a shared understanding of the contracting parties. When the purpose for such a relationship is lost, the parties quit the association and they go on to their own separate ways. Such contractual relationships are mostly fleeting and temporary. Political and economic associations come and go precisely because people's interests change and shift from time to time.

There is, however, a more profound social arena which is more stable than particular interests. There are forms of sociality that determine our very existence itself. These forms include the family, the town, the nation, humanity, and religious orders. They influence our conception of ourselves; it answers the question of who we

are; and it responds to the kind of person that we want to be.

In order to clarify this distinction, Karol Wojtyla suggests that we differentiate associations in terms of communities of action, and of communities of existence (TPP, 46). The former is an incidental event like attending a lecture or digging a canal while the latter is rooted to the substance of our being. The latter deserves the term "natural societies" because they basically correspond to the social nature of man" (TPP, 46). When the chord of such associations are struck by controversies, such as in the case of Flor Contemplacion -- when the issue of the family and patrimony were at stake-- they galvanize and mobilize the whole nation to rally against the perceived perpetrator.

The principle of social solidarity therefore, does not only entail participation and conformity to the *status quo*. It also requires opposition, when necessary, for the sake of the community. The revolution of 1896, the anti-Japanese Resistance Movements of the 1940s and the EDSA uprising of 1986 are examples of how genuine solidarity is harnessed for the sake of the community. Opposition is important for the community because it makes room for improvement and dynamism for the sake of the community's good. St. Thomas exhibits his sense of balance between the right to resist tyranny, on the one hand, and the common good of the community, on the other hand:

the overthrowing of such [a tyrannical] government is not strictly sedition; except perhaps the case that it is accompanied by such disorder that the community suffers greater harm from the consequent disturbances that it would from continuance of the former rule (ST. Q. 42 Art. 2).

With the advent of modern communications technology, however, ideological conflicts can be evaluated by the public through various forms of media. The possibility of social disturbance is therefore confined by the rationality of the contending parties. Threats to violence is constrained by the alternative to dialogue.

The possibilities of dialogue is conditioned by the linguistic ability of humans. Language abstracts our immediate concerns to the level of universal understanding which allows for dialogue. In "On Princely Government" (OPG), St. Thomas extols the linguistic ability of humans that differentiate them from animals:

men alone have the power of speech which enables them to convey the full content of their thoughts to one another. Other animals show their feelings, it is true, but only in a general way, as when a dog betrays its anger by barking

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and other animals in different ways. Man, then, is more able to communicate with his kind than any other animal, even those which appear to be the most gregarious, such as cranes, ants or bees (Bk. 1, Ch. 1).

By exchanging ideas, humans are able to adjudicate conflicts on the basis of the validity of their claims, and not on arbitrary caprice or particular feelings.

Metaphysics of the "We are"

In an article entitled "The 'We are' of Interpersonal Dialogue as the Starting Point of Metaphysics," Norris Clarke suggests that interpersonal dialogue is perhaps a better starting point for doing metaphysics (MS 357-368). Dialogue offers an experience of the irrefutable active presence of a real [human] being. Dialogue presupposes that there is someone to whom our address is directed at and that this someone can say yes or no to our claims. We cannot deny the reality of our dialogue partner. Otherwise, our communication is in vain.

Since this partner can affirm or deny our claims on reality, he is symmetrical to our own reality. We are therefore equal partners in the process of communication. This human being is not merely an object that can be manipulated by our whims, but he or she can actually deny and refuse to participate in the dialogue. He or she is not only an equal partner in dialogue. He or she is likewise free and rational, and therefore deserves to be treated as such.

From this starting point, the full dimension of what it means to be, can be extrapolated: material beings below us participate in our experiences of feeling, vegetating and weighing while the spiritual beings above us possess more intensified forms of existence. They have a more adequate grasp of truth and goodness of which our finite reason and limited freedom can only aspire.

In spite of this hierarchical structure of being, however, there is democratic equality among beings insofar as we all participate in the act of existence. We share in being in various forms, but we are all sharers, nevertheless, of existence itself. From this perspective, we all have the right to exist. The foundation of such an existence, ultimately, is the shared participation of all beings in the most perfect being who shared existence to us.

As images of this most intensive lover who shared himself to us, we likewise share ourselves with other beings as far as possible. In the process of this sharing, we fulfill our solidary obligations to the community; in accordance with our capacities and abilities. When this is achieved, we come to realize not only the expression of our innermost selves, but also the fulfillment of the other participants in our community. Likewise, our non-fulfillment denies the community of our potential contributions, just as the non-fulfillment of others deprives everyone of their talents. It is therefore within the context of the complementary function of individuals within a social whole that we are able to imitate the loving kindness of Him who first shared Himself to us.

Conclusion

From the perspective of the intrinsic solidarity of all beings, it is important to thank every being that is, for their capacity to share themselves to us. We would not have been, if not for their existence. Think of possibility of the non-being of the air, the sea, the soil, the trees, and every living thing that crawls the earth; without them, we probably would hardly survive at all. And yet we are, thanks to the Great Being who made possible the community of beings.

NOTES

MS: W. Norris Clarke, SJ, "The 'We are' of Interpersonal Dialogue as the Starting Point of Metaphysics, " *Modern Schoolman* LXIX (March/May, 1992), 357 - 368.

PBE: W. Norris Clarke, SJ, *Person, Being, and Ecology* ed. with Commentary by Rainier A. Ibana (Quezon City : Ateneo Office of Research and Publications, 1996).

PW: Daniel McNamara, SJ, "A New Model for the Physical World," Oikocenter : Center for Studies in Sustainable Development (Quezon City : Ateneo Economics Department, 1992).

TPP: Karol Wojtyla, *Towards a Philosophy of Praxis*, ed. by Alfred Bloch and George Czuczka (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1981).

OPG: St. Thomas Aquinas, "On Princely Government" in *Aquinas Selected Political Writings*, ed. by Ap. D'Entreves, trans. by J.G. Dawson (New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1981).

ST: St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*.