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Utilizing Basic Mathematical Concepts in Reinventing an Eclectic Philosophy of Man

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Abstract

This article presents a diverse philosophy on the fundamental nature of human being, the meaning of man's existence in this world, the existence of evil and the reason for man's suffering, and the fulfillment of his function and his final destiny. The views however are not all-original and are just results of philosophical eclecticism. Perceptions and interpretations on several philosophies that seem to be odd with each other are sought to be brought together. Using basic mathematical concepts, particularly the real numbers and the mysterious infinity, existing philosophies are supplemented with novice-like insights from which everyone is free to disagree.

Keywords: philosophy of man; nature of a human being; man's existence; evil; suffering; fulfillment of man's function; final destiny; perfection; absolute being; infinity

1. Introduction

Borrowing from the words of Dr. Co: *No one, and just no one who has lived through the past decades, can grow to philosophical maturity without being disturbed by puzzles of an essentially philosophical kind* [1].

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And every thinking individual actually experiences this kind of intellectual disturbance, more often than not, by questions about his very nature and the reason of his existence.

The inquiry into a man as person and as existent being in the world is known as philosophy of man. This philosophy is a continuous search for the meaning and relevance of life. It is an endless inquiry in a person's attempt to understand himself and the world he lives in, his dignity, truth, freedom, justice, love, death, and his relations with others and with God [2].

Of anything, Aristotle said, one can ask four questions: (1) what is it?, (2) what is it made of?, (3) by what is it made?, and (4) for what end is it made? [3]. Similarly, one can ask these questions concerning a human being: (1) what is a human being?, (2) what composes a human being?, (3) what (or who) made a human being?, and (4) for what end is a human being made?

This paper tried to answer these questions. Utilizing the basic mathematical concepts of real numbers, number line and infinity and the existing philosophies of the world; it aimed to provide an eclectic philosophy of man. In particular, the objectives of this analysis are as follows:

- To explore the nature of a human being and the reason for his existence;
- To examine the existence of evil and the meaning of man's suffering; and
- To discuss man's fulfillment of his function and his final destiny.

2. Mathematics as Foundation

Several great philosophers are also great mathematicians. They include Thales, Pythagoras, Rene Descartes, Blaise Pascal, Isaac Newton, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, and Bertrand Russell, among others. Their works in philosophy are very inspiring for present-day philosophers to also use mathematics as the foundation of their philosophies.

Pythagoras became interested in mathematics for what appear to be religious reasons. His originality consists partly in his conviction that the study of mathematics is the best purifier of the soul. Descartes looked at mathematics for the best example of clear and precise thinking. *My method*, he said, *contains everything which gives certainty to the rule of arithmetic*. He was convinced that mathematical certainty is the result of a special way of thinking [3].

Mathematics is also a remarkable example of the truths of reason, since its propositions are true when they pass the test of the law of contradiction. Leibniz said that *the great foundation of mathematics is the principle of contradiction ... that is, that a proposition cannot be true and false at the same time*. He further said that *this single principle is sufficient to demonstrate every part of arithmetic and geometry*. In short, truths of reason are self-evident truths [3].

But what is most striking was the Pythagoreans' claim that all things are numbers. This account of things sounds quite strange but for them, to say that all things are numbers meant that there is a numerical basis for all things which possess shape and size. In this way they moved from arithmetic to geometry and then to the structure of reality. All things had numbers, and their odd and even values explained opposites in things, such as one and many, straight and curve, rest and motion. Even light and dark are numerical opposites, as are male and female, good and evil [3].

The very basic concepts of numbers were also used as the foundation for reinventing the philosophy of man presented in the last section of this paper. The so-called set of real numbers consists of zero, positive numbers and negative numbers. As every numerate individual know the real line or number line has zero in the middle, the positive numbers on the right of zero and the negative numbers on the left of zero. Numbers are human invention brought about by the need to measure and count things. Counting began with 1, 2, many; it slowly evolved to include all the positive integers or counting numbers [4]. Opposite each positive integer is a negative integer. The idea of a negative number resulted from the subtraction of a higher number from a lower number.

In the number line, counting the integers to the right of zero will never end and hence there is the so-called positive infinity. Similarly, counting to the left of zero will lead to negative infinity. But it is unknown to many that infinity is not a number and hence, not part of the real number system. To include infinity meant to have a new system called the extended real line, which is the union of real numbers and the positive and negative infinity.

The concept of infinity seems to be a mystery of mathematics. Infinity denotes a quantity that increases without bound, in contrast to a finite quantity. Infinity is greater than any number that can be specified. But it is not a number; any number no matter how large is finite [5].

What seems to be more mysterious is that positive infinity and negative infinity are the same when it comes to size; they are both infinity. The common mistake is that negative infinity is smaller than zero [6]. The fact is that negative infinity, like positive infinity, is larger than zero and larger than any number. Positive infinity and negative infinity differ only in the direction (opposite, i.e. one is to the right and the other is to the left) they take away from zero. Similarly in geometry, there are infinitely many rays (or arrows) that can be drawn from a point, each taking a different direction but all pointing toward infinity. At this point, let the positive numbers be *Beings* and the negative numbers be *not-Beings*. Let also the positive infinity be *Absolute Being* and the negative infinity be *Absolute not-Being* or *Absolute Nothing*.

3. Hegel's Dialectic Process

The above discussion implies that Absolute Being and Absolute Nothing are the same in some sense. At first, it seems to be not possible since it may not pass Leibniz' test of the law of contradiction but on second thought, it may be true since it seems to pass the test of the law of sufficient reason.

In his dialectic method, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel said that the mind must always move from the more general and abstract to the specific and concrete. The most general concept that can be formed about things is that they are. Although various things have specific and different qualities, they all have one thing in common, namely, their being. Being, then, is the most general concept that the mind can formulate. Also, Being must be logically prior to any specific thing, for things represent determinations or the shaping of what is originally without features [3].

Hegel argued that whenever one tries to think of Being without any particular characteristic, the mind moves from Being to not-Being. This of course means that in some sense Being and not-Being are the same. Hegel was aware as he said that *the proposition of Being and Nothing are the same is so paradoxical to the imagination or understanding that it is perhaps taken as a joke*. Indeed to understand Being and Nothing as the same, said Hegel, *is one of the hardest things thought expects itself to do*. Of course, Hegel is not implying that one can say of particular things that they simultaneously are the same as nothing. His argument is limited to the concept of pure Being, which he said, contains the idea of Nothing [3].

4. The Theory of Creation

Although Plato said that mind orders everything, he did not develop a theory of creation. The theory of creation holds that things are created out of nothing [3].

It was Aurelius Augustinus (Saint Augustine of Hippo) who developed this distinctive theory that God created all things *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. This was in contrast to Plato's account of the world which was not *created* but came about when the Demiurge combined the Forms and the receptacle, which always existed independently. Augustine stressed that the world is the product of God's free act, whereby he brings into being, out of nothing, all the things that make up the world. All things, then, owe their existence to God [3].

It is also worthy to mention that a Muslim scholar Ibn Sina (Avicenna) formulated his own doctrine of creation. Avicenna started with the assumption that whatever begins to exist must have a cause. A thing that requires a cause is called possible being. A cause which is also a possible being must be caused by a prior being. This too must have a cause, but there cannot be an infinite series of such causes. There must therefore be a First Cause, whose being is not simply possible but is necessary, having its existence in itself and not from a cause. This Necessary Being is God, who is at the apex of Being, has no beginning, always is in act (i.e. is always expressing his full Being), and therefore has always created. According to Avicenna, creation is both necessary and eternal [3].

Ever since the time of Aristotle, logicians thought that nothing could be deduced from a category that was not contained in that category. It is easy to prove that nothing cannot produce something or a thing cannot come from nothing. What then does it mean to say that God creates a thing out of nothing?

Thomas d'Aquino (Saint Thomas Aquinas) thought that if God is the source of all beings, then there cannot be any other source of being. Prior to creation there is only God; God does not act upon any existing material since no

primary matter exists. Only God exists originally, and whatever comes to be, derives its existence from God. Everything then is a creature of God because it came ultimately from God and there are no independent sources of being other than God [3].

As in the concept of positive infinity and negative infinity being one and the same in some sense, the Absolute Being and the Absolute Nothing can both refer to one and the same God. God is the Absolute Being and hence, he is the source of all beings. God is the Absolute Nothing and therefore, he can create a thing out of nothing. Saying that God creates a thing out of nothing can mean that God creates a thing out of himself.

As regards the concept of extended real line, if one will be going from the leftmost to the rightmost of the line, he had to start at infinity and end at infinity. Analogous to this, the creation begun from infinity and will end at infinity. This is not saying that the biblical account on creation is not true. The Bible is full of symbolisms. The number 1 can be a symbol for *first* or the beginning and the number 7 can be a symbol for *perfection* or the end. God started creating on the *first day*, which can refer to infinity and rested on the *seventh day* or on the *day of perfection*, which can also refer to infinity. This may further implies that God is continuously creating up to the present time and until the time that his creations come into perfection. Every life that begins is a result of God's continuing creative powers.

5. Some Views on Nature of the Human Being

The Stoics shaped their view of human nature by simply transferring the study of the human beings the very same ideas they had used in describing nature at large. Just as the world is a material order permeated by the fiery substance called reason or God, so also a person is a material being who is permeated by this very same fiery substance. The Stoics are famous for the saying that people contain a spark of the divine within them which means that a person contains part of the substance of God. God is the soul of the world and each person's soul is part of God [3].

Socrates was the first to develop the concept of soul which he called psyche. The soul for him was not any particular faculty nor was it any special kind of substance. Instead, it was the capacity for intelligence and character; it was the structure of personality. For him, the activity of the soul is to know and to influence or even direct and govern a person's daily conduct. Although for Socrates the soul was not a *thing*, he could say that man's greatest concern should be the proper care of his soul so as to *make the soul as good as possible* [3].

Plato assumed that the soul is the principle of life and movement. The body by itself is inanimate, and therefore when it acts or moves, the soul must be moving it. In this sense, he describes the soul as having three parts, namely reason, spirit and appetite. This three-part conception of a soul is based on the three different kinds of activity going on in a person. First, there is an awareness of a goal or a value and this is the act of reason. Second, there is the drive

toward action – the spirit – which is neutral at first but responds to the direction of reason. Last, there is the desire for the things of the body, the appetite [3].

Plato believed that the human person is composed of a body and a soul. The body of a human person is subject to change and impermanence. Nevertheless, since the human person has the capacity to know the unchanging and permanent, part of him should therefore be permanent as well. Whoever knows the permanent must itself be permanent in some way and whoever knows essences must itself somehow be an essence. Because the human person is capable of knowing the permanent and the essences of things, then part of him should also be permanent. This part of the human person that makes him know the permanent is his soul. Plato believed that the soul therefore is the whole of the human person [7].

Aristotle categorized the soul into three types, namely vegetative, sensitive and rational. These represent the various capacities of the body; the first being simply the act of living, the second both living and sensing, and the third includes living, sensing and thinking. For Aristotle, the soul is inseparable from its body; without the body, the soul could not exist [3].

Like Plato, Aristotle believed that the human being is composed of a body and a soul. But unlike Plato, Aristotle considered that the soul and the body are not separate entities in a human person but correlative constituents of one being. The soul forms the entelechy, the definitive form, of the body. For Plato, the soul and the body are two separate entities and hence, he could speak of the preexistence and immortality of the soul. Aristotle however, tied the soul and the body so closely together that with the death of the body, the soul will also die with it [7]

Aquinas had a distinctive conception of human nature. Human nature, he said, is a physical substance. What made this a unique conception was that Aquinas insisted upon the unity of human nature. Plato had talked about the soul as being imprisoned in the body and Augustine considered the soul as a spiritual substance. Both Plato and Aristotle agreed that the soul is the form of the body but did not see, as Aquinas did, that the soul of a person is dependent upon the body as the body is upon the soul. To say that a person is a physical substance underscored the substantial unity of human nature. Each human being is a unity of body and soul. Without the soul, the body would have no form. Without the body, the soul would not have its required organs of sense through which to gain its knowledge. It is the soul that gives each person life. The soul accounts also for the human capacity for sensation and the powers of the intellect and will [3].

Augustine considered the human person as *imago Dei* as he bears the image of God. Augustine also held the human person's crowning glory resides in his being an *imago Dei*. God created the human person in God's own image and likeness. Hence, there is this unique relationship between the human person and God because the human person is created by the creator as an expression of itself [7].

6. Philosophy of Man: A Reinvention

With the above analyses and discussions, presented herewith are some philosophies, which are the results of philosophical eclecticism. Existing philosophies are reviewed and interpreted and using some basic mathematical concepts that were discussed in the previous sections, an eclectic philosophy of man is reinvented.

6.1. Nature of a human being and reason for his existence

Why does a man exist and what is his true nature?

A man exists because he was made to exist for a reason that is not known to him yet and will be known to him only when he attained his perfection. A human being was created by God, the Absolute Being. He was created out of nothing, that is, out of God himself, for God is also the Absolute Nothing. Since man was created out of God himself, he can claim that he was made *imago Dei*, in the image and likeness of God.

Inasmuch as the human being was created in the image and likeness of God, then the Stoics might be correct in saying that a person contains part of the substance of God. God is the Absolute Nothing and therefore, there is also *nothing* within each person. This *nothing* can be the human soul, the *imago Dei* part of the human being. Hence, Plato might be correct also in saying that the true human self is the human soul.

God, the Absolute Being, is the only perfect and immortal being. God is perfect and every part of the substance of God is perfect. However the things, including the human soul, created by God out of his perfect self are all imperfect. God is immortal but all things he created, including again the human soul, are all mortals.

Plotinus said that God could not duplicate himself perfectly. In the words of Leibniz, *God could not give the creature all without making it God, there must be limitations of every kind*. Hence, the world of creation consists of limited and imperfect things [3].

Since the human soul is imperfect, it can be said that it needed to have a body. Hence, Aristotle might be correct in saying that the human being is composed of body and soul created together. But the body and soul created by perfect and immortal God are both imperfect and mortal. Plato might be wrong in saying that the human soul preexisted and is immortal.

The human soul is created by God together with its body, as Aristotle also believed. But Aristotle might be wrong in saying that the body and soul are inseparable. It might be true that during lifetime, the body and soul are inseparable; they needed each other in order to live. But at the time of death, though it can be said that both body and soul died, it might also be true that they were then separated. When a human person died, the body remains in the world but the soul, considering that it is a substance of God, is bound to return to God to be in perfect unity with God when it had attained its perfection.

6.2. Existence of evil and meaning of man's suffering

Why is there evil? If all things come from God, does it mean evil also comes from God? Simple answer: Evil is not a *thing*, hence it does not come from God. Evil is the result of some imperfections of the world, especially of human beings.

For Plotinus, evil is the discrepancy between the soul's right intentions and its actual behavior. It is an imperfection in the soul-body arrangement. Evil is not a positive destructive force. It is the lack of perfection and the lack of form for the material body, which is not itself essentially evil. Leibniz added that evil is not something substantial but merely the absence of perfection. The source of evil, he said, is not God but rather the very nature of things God creates, for as these things are finite or limited, they are imperfect [3].

For Augustine, evil is the product of the will. Evil is not an existing reality but a deprivation of something. There are things that are considered evil simply because they do not harmonize with other things. However, unlike Augustine who viewed evil as a privation of good, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin believed that evil exists necessarily as part of this world. Evil, he said, occurs by statistical necessity. It appears by the very structure of the system and a universe in evolution is necessarily a *universe which labors, which sins, which suffers*. For Teilhard, the existence of evil seemed to be rigorously inevitable concomitant of creation [7].

By analogy to the number line concept, the positive numbers are all the things that exist and the negative numbers are the imperfection of such things. All that exist are considered good but the absence of goodness is evil. The world is incomplete without God; just like the real line without the infinity. To the right through the increasing positive numbers and to the left through the decreasing negative numbers both go toward infinity. Similarly, more and more goodness and less and less evil will both bring a person closer to God.

God is perfect; God is good; and God is powerful. Then why does suffering occur? Since evil is part of the world, then suffering too has a special part in the life of a human being. Life is not complete if without suffering.

Siddharta Gautama considered suffering to be important in the life of a person inasmuch as this will be the means for the realization that he should not be too attached with his life. For Teilhard, suffering is part of the very law of becoming. Through pains, a person is growing pursuant to his nature, although it appears as if he is diminishing. What makes evil of evil is not at all the pain but the feeling of diminishing the pain. If one could feel that by the pain he could increase and grow, then he could accept the pain [7].

Accepting evil and suffering as part of the human life however, does not imply that one should not avoid such. Doing evil is not in accordance with the nature of a human being. Though not perfect, every person is to be considered good for he was created in the image and likeness of the *Summum Bonum* or the Highest Good. It is therefore necessary that he should be following his nature as good in order to achieve the real purpose of his existence.

As Plato before him, Aristotle tied the word good to the special function of a thing. To discover the good at which a person should aim, he must discover the distinctive function of the human nature. The good person, according to Aristotle, is the person who is fulfilling his function as human being [3].

6.3. Fulfillment of man's function and his final destiny

Most philosophers consider happiness as the fulfillment of a person's distinctive function. For Moises Maimonides, the goal of human life is to achieve human perfection. The final mystical triumph of the Pythagoreans is liberation from the *wheel of birth*, from the migration of the soul to animal and other forms in the constant progress of death and birth. The Buddhists share the same belief with the Pythagoreans on the liberation of the human being from the cycle of birth and rebirth to enter *Nirvana*. Teilhard held that death is the inevitable destiny that is implied in birth and that circumscribes life. All of these however, point towards God as the human being's final fulfillment and destiny.

John Scotus Erigena explained that as all things proceed from God, they also all return to God. Whatever starts from a principle returns again to this same principle and in this way the universal cause draws to itself the multitude of things that have risen from it. With this return there is an end to all evil, and people find their union with God [3].

However, it is only through God's grace that one can find true happiness or attain perfection or be in unity with God. Through more and more goodness one can get closer and closer to God, but without God's grace, he cannot reach God and be with him, no matter what he does.

According to Teilhard, the created world will only be able to obtain its perfection during the course of its evolution. He had this idea that God created the world in a multiple and hence it will undergo a process of evolution. God's creative act is a gradual process of unification. In God, he said, *to create is to unite* [7].

Hence, God's creative act is not yet complete. It will finally be completed when the world attain its perfection, that is, when God and his creatures come into unity. This might be on *day 7*, the *day of perfection*, the day when God will rest. And that might also be the end of the world. Thus, the world will end at *infinity*; this however, does not mean that the world will never end. It is only God, the Absolute Being and the Absolute Nothing, who knows when that *infinity* will be.

7. Concluding Remark

Borrowing again from Dr. Co: *The true pleasure of philosophy is the activity of philosophizing itself* [1]. This is an eclectic philosophy of man and every man is free to disagree.

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