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### **Self-Transcendence: Key to National Development**

Were any of us to ask most Nigerians the cause of the obvious contradiction that our nation has become – a nation so generously blessed by nature (or God) as far as human and material resources are concerned, he would hear listed by most respondents as the culprits such things as bad leadership, pervasive corruption, ethnicity, poor quality education, and so on. But were such to probe further by asking a more fundamental question: Why do we have bad leadership, corruption, ethnicity, etc, we can be sure most people may not easily provide a succinct and convincing answer to such. But as people who have had the fortune (or misfortune, for some) of some degree of acquaintance with that discipline that has as its main objective rational critical appraisal of issues and problems of human existence, we should not be satisfied with easy but shallow explanation of puzzles, particularly where such have serious consequences for human well-being. We must aim at reaching and revealing the fundamentals.

Whereas we must acknowledge the likely suggestions of the man-on-the-street mentioned above as the immediate causes of our contradictory but pitiable situation, we must note that those are merely manifestations of a more fundamental problem that has constituted the clog in the wheel of our progress as a nation – egocentrism. It is the obsessive focus on the self by most of us, leaders and followers alike, that has been the

bane of our progress. The other immediate causes will cease to be there if we re-oriented ourselves, becoming less obsessed with *our-selves* and taking the *selves* of others into serious account in our daily conduct.

But why do most of us usually get so preoccupied with *our-selves* and our interests that we take little or no account of *other-selves* and their interests? This, we think, is a direct consequence of our inability to reflect adequately on what we are, what *other-selves* are, our relation to such and our place first in our country and then in the entire universe. Thus attempting an answer to the questions: 'What am I?' And 'What is the other person?' becomes imperative. The better self-understanding which adequate reflection on such questions as these may yield will likely result in my voluntary modification of my personal and social conduct. So what am I? What is the other? What is our relation to each other and our relation to the nation and the entire universe?

### **Understanding My Being and the Other's Being**

A simplistic way of looking at my being either by *my-self* or *other-selves* is to see me simply as a being among a multitude of other beings in the universe. But this will prove dissatisfactory, for there are peculiar things about my being. Hence we must take a deeper plunge in our attempt to define my being. I am not a being-just-there, like many others. No. I am a being conscious of its own existence. I am a significant whole, a microcosm, and yet occupies a relatively insignificant space within the universe at every given time. My being is so significant that it can turn round the course of events in the intimidatingly large universe, yet so inconsequential to this same universe that it does not stop for a second in the event of my ceasing to be at any time. My being possesses so much power that it can create a conspicuous and indelible chapter in human history, yet so powerless that I can so easily become mere history. I am a being ever yearning and striving to perpetuate my existence and indeed ensure that that existence is a happy one. Succinctly put, I long not just for my mere continued existence but a commodious one.

But what is the other? Is the other being fundamentally different from myself, a being more or less significant than I am? Is his desire for continued and commodious existence of less intensity or less justified than mine? I have to believe that the right

answer to these questions must be in the negative. For, although I cannot experience in my being the being of the other, I must believe, by the mere fact of our common share in the defining fundamental characteristics of our species, that he is equally a being with the potentials and deficiencies associated with my being. When I come to the full awareness of this reality and let same shape my conduct then I will see the need to allow the other as much share of the commonwealth and opportunities as I would want myself allowed. I will equally begin to realize that my overall interest may actually be better served in the long run if I were to act in a way that ensures the realization of our common good rather than mine alone. But where I fail to adequately appreciate the nature of my being, the other's being and our place in the universe, I tend to become engrossed in a futile attempt to transform myself from being a mere part of the nation or universe to their center. I become utterly egocentric, I see no other being, desires, aspirations or world besides mine. And this sort of mindset is at the root of our inability to make any meaningful progress as a nation. It is our inability as individuals and citizens to look beyond ourselves and our self-interests that incapacitates us collectively. Most of us have come to accept the ethical egoist's thesis that we should always act according to what is in our self-interest. For the egoist, we have no obligation to take others' interests into account in our conduct.

But what is wrong with the ethical egoist's position? A lot, we believe. However, we wish to address our minds rather to the most fundamental of the flaws in his thesis. This flaw is a direct consequence of his desire that his theory becomes a universal maxim. The theory clearly suggests that everyone should imbibe and act according to what it prescribes. This problem, as some others have observed,<sup>1</sup> is that sometimes my interest may conflict with those of others, such that my pursuit of my interest may actually mean blocking another from actualizing his own, and vice-versa. Thus subscribing to ethical egoism would commit me both to maximizing my interest and at the same to another acting sometimes in ways that jeopardize the same. What such situation may then result to is mutual damage to our conflicting interests.

Many of us however fail to appreciate this major weakness in the sort of attitude advocated by the egoist. And so we often act according to his maxim in our capacity as

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Robert L. Holmes, *Basic Moral Philosophy*, California: Wadsworth, Inc, 1993, p. 101

players in the different spheres of our life as a nation. This manifests itself in different ways.

### **Different Manifestations of Egocentrism in Our National Life**

The problem of over-concentration on the self manifests itself in every sphere of our life as a nation. These include the political, religious, socio-economic and academic spheres. Although it is practically impossible here to describe all the instances of our display of our obsession with the self in our daily interactions with fellow citizens in the different vital spheres of our national life, and their consequences – direct or indirect – we can at least list out some.

#### *The Political Sphere*

As we mention the political, the temptation may be to direct our minds to those occupying political offices in the land. But our consideration must not become too narrow. We must broaden our minds. And broadening our minds will not mean overlooking the self-centred conducts of the category of people mentioned above. It rather means not limiting our search to them but equally taking into account other seemingly less important selfish behaviours, but behaviours without which such political office holders would not have gotten to where they are in the first place.

We need not here bore ourselves with many of those obvious immoral conduct of political office holders in our country. We already know that such things exist at every level of government. We know about the manipulation of electoral processes to get into various political offices those who are clearly unqualified either mentally or morally, for the selfish interests of the perpetrators. We know about the flagrant abuse of office in the way of embezzlement of public funds by those entrusted with such. We know about the use of impeachment threats by legislatures against the executive to get the latter either approve the release of funds to the former or accede to some other requests that only serve the interest of the former. We know about the use of the bribery option by the executive sometimes to get done in the legislature things that serve the interest of the

former, even to the detriment of the citizenry. We know about the use of the cowardly assassination option to silence political opponents. We know about the sit-tight syndrome, leaders wanting to remain in public at all cost, however loud the public outcry against their dissatisfactory leadership. We know all these and more, and must therefore not bore ourselves with stories that exemplify such. It may be necessary however to point out that in each of these the underlying feature is an undue focus on the self. It is equally such egocentrism that makes me unduly favour members of *my* ethnic group, friends and other acquaintances in the distribution of the commonwealth and opportunities to the detriment of other equally deserving members of the society, once I find *my-self* in a position of authority. In such situations I do not favour such people because they are members of just any ethnic group, or because they are friends and relations of some people, but because they are members of *my* ethnic group and because they are *my* relations or *my* friends. In all of this the emphasis is *my-self*, my being.

As we reflect on our current subject however, it may well be important to equally reflect on the role we sometimes play in perpetuating the nightmare that political leadership in our country has become. We can begin by asking ourselves how the people who fraudulently manage to scheme themselves into positions of authority in the land and continue the brazen rape of our nation manage to get to where they are and achieve the other ignoble goals. We must admit that they do not actualize them without the aid of other less noticeable individuals and groups.

Take this example. I am a young man or woman having some role to play in the determination of the political future of my nation via elections. I am approached by politicians with some money to either vote for them, mobilize others to do so, be present at their rallies as a member of a rented crowd, play some part in the falsification of election results, be a member of a group mandated to stimulate electoral violence to facilitate election rigging, or – the worst of them all – ensure the elimination of political opponents. Because I believe I need the money, I collect it and do as I have been paid to do. I am only concerned about my self-interest, I care less about the immediate and remote consequences of my action for the nation at large.

Sometimes too I find myself approving of a political leader not because his leadership has translated to improvement in the welfare of the entire citizenry but because

a particular action or policy of his favours *me* or *mine*. My sense of judgment is therefore blurred by my interests and I become all too willing to engage whoever sees things differently in a fight, however convincing and superior to mine his arguments may seem. The focus is myself, I see myself as the center of gravity, my interests as the determinants of right and wrong.

### *The Religious Sphere*

What of the religious sphere, what do we see? We see churches and mosques springing up at such a fast rate across the country. The irony however is that vices and crimes seem to be increasing at equally the same rate, such that one wonders if there is any necessary connection between the two. But, believing that the God who these worship places profess to be campaigning for is one seen as all-good, we are compelled to believe that there is no such necessary connection. The problem, we believe, is the attitude behind the emergence of these worship places. But what is it? Often we find men and women who vow that God came to them in one form and place or the other begging them to be his indispensable tool in beginning one evangelical movement or the other. However, since such visitations as these “apostles” of God claim to have received from him are purely subjective experiences, there is no basis for us effectively disprove their claim. The fact however is that we cannot rule out the possibility of the desires and ambition of these individuals being the “God” that spoke to them. They therefore establish their churches or mosques not primarily because they want to bring people to God but because they want to improve their economic situation, increase their fame and enhance their social status generally. The consequence of this sort of motivation for establishing places of worship is the indulgence in all manner of behaviour antithetical to true religion. These include the blackmailing of the more gullible members of their churches and mosques to offer as much money as possible to “God” and the engagement of the occult for the acquisition of some powers to perform “miracles” to further ensure increase in the population of followers. In this sort of situation less emphasis of morals in the leader’s sermons becomes a necessity of course. He cares less if his members are decaying, morally, once his fame and wealth are on the increase. Here again the emphasis is on the *self*.

### *The Socio-economic Sphere*

We also see well manifested in our socio-economic life the blind pursuit of self-interest. The most extreme of this is obviously the use of other human beings for rituals aimed at bringing riches and other benefits to the perpetrators. There are several other ways, however, we exhibit our egocentricity in our dealings with others as fellow citizens. Take the different reactions of the different individuals affected one way or the other each time there is fuel crisis in the country. If I own a filling station and I foresee fuel scarcity in the nearest future, I stop selling to buyers. My action achieves two things for me. First, it helps increase the anxiety of buyers. And, second, such anxiety will make them all too willing to buy even at outrageously hiked prices. But I do not even stop at that. I also go ahead to manipulate my dispensing machines to ensure that they actually dispense less quantity each time than their metres indicate, so as to further maximize my profit. If I am a transporter on the other hand, I hike my fare as much disproportionately as possible, using the fuel situation as the justification for my inhumane act. In all this I bother less about the inconveniences my actions cause those at the receiving end, nor do I care about the economic loss such amount to my nation. The only important thing, for me, is that my profit is increased.

The same attitude informs the vandalism of public property, such as petroleum products pipelines, power distribution lines, etc, by those who engage in it for selfish economic gains to the detriment of the entire public.

On the other hand we see citizens who once they find themselves in positions of authority will do none of those things that form part of the responsibility of their offices for the benefit of others without gratification, monetary or otherwise.

### *The Academic Sphere*

The academic sphere is not spared either. What do I do sometimes as a parent? I am ready to give whatever bribe is necessary to ensure my children achieve their academic goals, albeit without merit. I am quite willing to offer bribe to ensure that my children pass their examinations, even undeservingly. And where they could not pass the requisite

admission examinations, I am equally willing to buy the positions of other successful students just to ensure that *my* children or wards are admitted into schools of their choice. Through my action then I help to kill merit. And of course one inevitable consequence of such action is that my children become unserious with their academic work, knowing that whatever happens their academic “success” is assured. Those who receive financial inducements to carry out some inglorious requests in the education system are no less guilty in this.

What of my conduct as a student? *My-self* enters a public library and finds a book that *my-self* needs some parts of for some of *my-self's* work, but which for some reason *my-self* is not allowed to take out of the library. I tear the part *my-self* needs, fold it and tuck it in *my-self's* pocket and leave. *My-self* have achieved his immediate goal, that of having access to the material *my-self* needs for my work. But *my-self* fails to see that if every *self* that comes to use the library acts the same way as *my-self*, sometime soon *my-self* will look for some parts of some other books that *my-self* needs for other important work and not find them. Sometimes I can be less mean and only go to hide such book in the same library but where other *selves* cannot easily find it. The consequence will, however, be the same if all were to act the same way.

### **Conclusion**

Our position here is that to make progress as a nation, each of us must transcend ourselves. We must go beyond ourselves, realizing that when we act in favour of the common good we are equally acting for our own good. Every nation that has developed in the world has done so because some people were willing to look beyond their selfish interests. We may not necessarily have to make the kind of sacrifices that such heroes as Mahatma Gandhi of India, Rev. Martin Luther King Jnr of the United States of America or Nelson Mandela of South Africa made for fellow citizens. All that is required of us is acknowledging the existence of the others and acting in such a way as to accommodate their interests. If we are able to do this wherever we find ourselves, we will have set our nation on the path of growth and development.