

# A Conceptual Schema of the Ontology of Human Will and Poverty

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## Abstract:

Poverty as a concept aligns well with a continuous lack of human basic existential needs. This lack or need makes poverty usually associated with economic considerations. Understanding poverty holistically is also premised on the lack of human capacity development such as abilities and capabilities, intelligence quotient, accessing opportunities, growth and all round physical advancement. What is clearly prevalent in the determination of poverty is a “lack of basic needs” which can be material or immaterial. In this paper, we attempted to show the nexus between human will and poverty from an ontological and conceptual approach. Our theoretical framework was to delineate the human will into two aspects: individual and collective. Employing the critical and analytical method of investigation, we set out to interrogate the nature of the human will, equality and equity and the role individual and collective will plays in the entrenchment and elimination of global poverty. One of the major findings of the paper is that, capitalism, socialism and communism all arising from the human will, as an ideological imprint, bifurcate humanity and creates a scenario where life becomes the survival of the fittest. Hence, the human will is a serious subject matter with varied implications for poverty.

**Keywords:** poverty, will, individual, collective, humanity, equality, equity

## Introduction

Poverty is one of the biggest realities of the contemporary world. It cuts across all societies and peoples. Many theorists, especially in the capitalistic bent have attributed the causes of poverty to the will power of individual human beings and most have viewed it as a natural justice of the strong over the weak. Philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche are in praises of the strength of the strong over the weak and views altruism as the value of the weak. In his book *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche (1968: 27) writes that “one loses one’s power of resistance against stimuli-and comes to be at the mercy of accidents: one coarsens and enlarges one’s experiences tremendously – ‘depersonalization’, disintegration of the will; example: one whole type of morality, the altruistic one which talks

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much of pity-and is distinguished by the weakness of the personality, so that it is sounded, too, and like an over stimulated string vibrates continually-an extreme irritability”. Here, Nietzsche rejects the morality of altruism which is supposed to salvage humans from poverty through a collective will and oiled with mutual feelings of empathy and pity. It is on these grounds that Nietzsche presents his idea of the will, a highly individualistic will which is aimed at gaining and keeping power.

In the socialist bent, it is believed that poverty stems from the exploitation of the proletariats by the bourgeoisies. In this respect, Ziyad I. Husami (1978: 42) notes that “bourgeois society expands material wealth and contracts human possibilities; it fosters outer wealth and inward poverty” thus, creating a society that only appears rich but stagnates many people in poverty which stems from inequality and a lack of equity. With respect to a popular theorist on poverty, the Russell Sage Foundation (2006: 9) quotes Amartya Sen, as averring that “the theory of inequality evaluation has close links with that of assessment of poverty, and the choice of space becomes a central concern in identifying the poor...”. Though the individual will may contribute to the problem of poverty, it is also a valid point that social forces of inequality are present in the continued presence of poverty in the world. From here, it can be deduced that if the individual will is to take one out of poverty, the collective will has certain roles to play.

One notable understanding about poverty is the lack of basic economic needs such as food, clothing and shelter. And since according to Jean-Paul Sartre (2007: 22), man “is what he makes of himself”, then there is a clear connection between the individual human will and poverty *vis a vis* the collective human will. These two have roles to play in the promotion of poverty or its eradication. The implication of this is that humans can bring global poverty to an end. But to eradicate global poverty, humans must first of all, reach the conclusion that humanity is at most a composition of individuals, who are in constant relationship with one another i.e, a being first, which cannot exist in isolation, but with others. This position is advanced subsequently as the paper now moves to elucidating concepts and their frameworks.

### **The Human Will**

It is important that conceptual analysis is carried out because “in the world which we live, there are a lot of complexities, paradoxes and contradictions that has to be reduced to the level of our understanding via language” (Mbat and Archibong, 2012: 154). To this end, the concept of the *will* is related to the concept and strings of *choice* which is discussed

in moral and existential circles. Hence, according to Carme Giménez-Camins and Josep Gallifa (2011: 129) while quoting Espinalt, write that:

Human will is a conscious impulse that prevails over other inclinations of the temperament, opposing a system of brakes to each one, elaborated by the intellect and effects that have at the same time the power to remove obstacles and resistances.

Human will furthermore, is the use and reuse of the intellect towards overcoming life obstacles, such as poverty. In the same vein, Nietzsche (1968: 30-31) avers that the human:

... will to the typical degeneration of spirit, body, and nerves: an attempt to find the way to this higher level of being. To make oneself sick, mad, to provoke the symptoms of derangement and ruin-that was taken for becoming stronger, more superhuman, more terrible, wiser.

The only problem with Nietzsche's description of the *will* is that it strives toward incurring problems rather than solving them.

The human will can be viewed in two ways. The first is the facticity of the individual as a free agent who is condemned to willing. The individual human will results from the fact that the world is composed first of distinct individual beings who cannot but exists in relation with others. This relationship between distinct individuals is what is known as the collective human will when understood from the angle of solving common human problems. The concept of *collective human will* is synonymous with the idea of African communitarianism which focuses on building progress on the solid foundation of collectivism. However, Motsamai Molefe (2019: 155) notes the distinction between Afro-communitarianism and moderate communitarianism and avers that "Afro-communitarianism fails to accommodate crucial individualistic features like autonomy, which are vital for a decent life". On the part of moderate communitarianism, he quotes Gyekye who notes that "moderate communitarianism requires recognising the claims of both communality and individuality and integrating individual desires and social ideals and demands" (2019: 155).

The concept of *human will* is good insofar as it can be directed at achieving reasonable aims from issues that affects the entire human populace. The idea of the equality of all humans as a basic human right is a step towards solving a common human issue of gross inequality. However, humans must come to face a common and prevailing global issue with a sense of equality in mind as this will do well to yield a common reaction to an issue like poverty. The idea of collective will is impossible in an atmosphere of inequality since that will only constrain humans to think relatively rather than objectively. Poverty is not relative as it is a global issue with global consequences. The human will, as a

composition of man's individual will can be directed towards eradicating poverty.

### **Ontology of the Human Will**

Ontology is basically understood as the branch of philosophy that deals with the study of being. Consequently, Nicola Guarino *et al* (2009: 1) writes that "Aristotle dealt with this subject in his *Metaphysics* and defined Ontology as the science of 'being qua being', i.e., the study of attributes that belong to things because of their very nature". There are various definitions of the concept of ontology but according to Fabian Neuhaus (2017: 2), "the answer is that all of these definitions are not helpful...; any definition of 'ontology' is only helpful if our understanding of the definiens exceeds this kind of operational level of understanding". Hence, to understand ontology as a concept is to understand the basic definiens employed in explaining it such as its etymology which consists of *ontos* connoting 'being' and *logia* connoting 'study'. In this case, the concept of *ontology* cannot be detached from the study of *being*, which connotes everything that exist, whether abstract or material. This explains why Emmanuel Iniobong Archibong and Thomas Terkura Mchia (2022: 3) agree that "being must permeate the very rubric of reality with the purpose of grasping the true unchanging nature".

Philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger offer a twofold explanation of being. First, Heidegger (1962: 23) view being as a "universal entity" which connotes a global sort of being. He also discusses *Dasein*, the particular being. Heidegger asserts that, "*Dasein* is an entity which does not just occur among other entities" (1962: 32). The meaningfulness of *Dasein* is not limited to the fact that it exists, "only the particular *Dasein* decides its existence" (1962: 33). Hence, a major attribute of the particularly existing being is the fact that it decides, that is, while existing, it makes choices. Jean-Paul Sartre (2018: 94) also views *being* in twofold: *being* in general and the relations that link them. Thus, "man possesses a human nature; this "human nature", which is the concept of that which is human, is found in all men, which means that, each man is a particular example of a universal concept-man" (Sartre, 2007: 22). In this case, the *beingness* of man is concreted in the idea of the universal human nature which is a summation of individual humans. Hence, all human beings are "condemned to be free" (Satre, 2007: 29), that is, to make choices. But the particular human is what he makes of himself via his choices. Hence, since freedom is universally inherent in human nature, then particular humans, as a being, should direct their individual freedom towards liquidating poverty. As a being with others,

the goal of liquidating poverty on the global scene is a matter of individual-collective human will. This is how the concept of Ontology distils into the concept of human Will.

### **Poverty and the Human Will**

There are various definitions of poverty with some considered as absolute and others relative. According to Rusitha Wijekoon and Mohammad Fazli Sabri (2021: 8):

There are two views on poverty which include absolute poverty and alludes to survival beneath least, socially adequate living circumstances, normally settled dependent on basic products, and nutritional necessities. Relative poverty looks at the most minimal sections of a populace with upper fragments, typically estimated in income quintiles or deciles. Absolute and relative poverty patterns might move in inverse ways. For instance, relative poverty might decline while absolute poverty increments....

The major idea deduced here is the fact that, poverty has to do with surviving beneath basic or adequate necessities of life and that poverty is global, affecting the entire human populace. In the views of Amartya Sen, poverty is linked with unfreedom; in his *Development as Freedom* (1999: 3), he writes that:

Development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or over activity of repressive states.

The view given in the afore-quoted is that these sources of unfreedom offer no room for an individual to express his freedom and strive above poverty level. What then is the basis of freedom if it is not to make choices over one's life?

Sartre (2007: 44) argues against this worldview by stating that "choice is possible. What is impossible is not to choose". What this portends is that in the face of this agents or sources of unfreedom, man still makes choices. And in such and such societies where the said sources of unfreedom are heightened, it cannot be denied that there are no individuals who do not by their choices, take themselves above poverty level. However, since man is first a being, who can never exist in isolation but with others, the counteracting forces of economics and society does not create some sort of limitations to individual human choices. Lets' take for instance, a man, such as a business inclined entrepreneur who is set to bring his innovations to limelight. He has been able to garner capital for his foresighted business and has projected his possibilities in the atmosphere of the current government of his country. However, while his business has flourished for a year and he is making some progress, a new government, which is not liked by the West takes

over from the old one. In this case, sanctions step in, business crumble, currency is devalued, and the young entrepreneur returns to his village in poverty. The same or something similar to the situation can be likened as the downward twists experienced by the young entrepreneur if he is resident in the Russian invaded Ukraine. He would find himself in Poland or any nearby country, while depending only on foreign aids. Thus, human will like all other abstract ideas, have its limitations. This is the reason that the human collective will exist as a larger part of the human individual will and is very essential to the diminishing of global poverty.

### **The Intersection between Human Will and Poverty**

The human will can strive above the pressures of society to elevate the self beyond the levels of poverty without causing harm to others. Henri Bergson (1974: 25) in his *Two Sources of Morality* writes that “besides, whether we speak the language of religion or the language of philosophy, whether it be a question of love or respect, a different morality, another kind of obligation supervenes, above and beyond the social pressure”. This entails that one must value, love and respect oneself in such a way that will move one above poverty and towards progress. Sometimes we may be willing to strive above this pressure but Amartya Sen (1999: 4) notes that:

Sometimes the lack of substantive freedoms relates directly to economic poverty, which robs people of the freedom to satisfy hunger, or to achieve sufficient nutrition, or to obtain remedies for treatable illnesses, or the opportunity to be adequately clothed or sheltered, or to enjoy clean water or sanitary facilities.

These are common problems that are observed in many parts of the world where people do not have or cannot afford their basic needs which includes food, clothing and shelter. The foremost way to eradicating poverty is to first of all be an individual. Ralph Waldo Emerson (2011: 14) avers that:

There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till.

Man is an individual being condemned to the making of choices. He must acknowledge that it is only on his field of choices that his will power can yield him reasonable harvests. Every human being takes this path of humanity where individual humans become aware of the fact that

they are responsible for themselves. Irresponsibility towards one's existence is the reason why in most part of the world, many people become complacent and indifferent about overcoming poverty by a strong resolution in the will. Thus, Ayn Rand (1964: 24-25) puts it that, "man must choose his actions, values and goals by the standard of that which is proper to man-in other to achieve, maintain, fulfil and enjoy that ultimate value, that end in itself, which is his own life". Individuals ought to be conscious of the fact that their actions do not serve as a highway to poverty. And if they find themselves not being able to afford basic needs, they must be responsible for it and strive as much as possible to overcome it.

Another step towards eradicating poverty through the human will is for individual humans to show concern, that is, empathy towards one another. This is where the idea of a collective will is ingrained, for if every human, being capable can lend a hand to a few fellow humans, then, collectivism of the will is achieved. Since a solitary existence is impossible in the community of humans, there ought to exist one with others. Humans ought to live with the awareness that their existence is tied to those of the other. However, the sort of relationship between humans that can lead to the eradication of poverty is what Martin Buber calls the *I-Thou* (or I-You). Here, there is a subject to subject relationship, and not the *I-It* relationship which is a subject-object relationship. Buber (1970: 51) avers that:

Love does not cling to an I, as if the You were merely its "content" or object; it is between I and You. Whoever does not know this with his being, does not know love, even if he should ascribe to it the feelings that he lives through, experiences, enjoys, and expresses. Love is a cosmic force.

Love resides in the individual in that every individual must first love himself by being responsible for himself before being loved by another "I". When this rule is applied by every individual including those in power, the world will be far extricated from being a place where survival of the fittest reigns but will be transformed into a globe devoid of poverty.

This paper offers an attempt of a dual answer to the question of the eradication of global poverty. Firstly, it prescribes that man ought to recognize his individuality and be responsible for himself by consciously directing his will towards overcoming poverty. Man ought to uphold the understanding that the path of his life is a novel path never experienced by any human. After doing so, he must be sure to show empathy towards fellow humans and share the responsibility of other humans insofar as he is capable of doing so. By this, the human will is realized, notably, through a subject-subject relationship where love is the basis. Some concepts, such as we have identified: *the will, love, empathy,*



*responsibility, relationship, choice and freedom* are all ontological realities that can make a whole lot of differences with regards to the concept and reality of *poverty* in the world.

### **Evaluation**

The problem of *poverty* is a global issue that is deserving of serious attention with some world bodies and agencies doing quite a lot to mitigating its negative effects. Poverty comes about as a result of human will through actions and inactions. Hence, only a revolution of the human will through his activities can bring about an end to poverty. In a world of vast inequality and social injustices, poverty cannot but thrive. Human basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter are things that the world can make available to all if there is a system of even distribution and responsibility stemming from the collective human will. While most of the known economic systems doesn't seem to cater entirely for the entire needs of man everywhere is because of the lack of will power on the individual and collective scale to do what is necessary and needful.

The onus of making the world a better place, either collectively or individually falls on humans. Since poverty occurs both at the individual and collective scale, man must face it individually by striving to grow above poverty level and must show concern towards his other fellow humans. This is one way humanity can stand face to face with the aim of achieving nothing else other than overcoming it. Capitalism brought with it individualism and competition which has undeniably boosted human economics and relegated socialism and communism. However, capitalism seems to have reduced man's existence to the struggle for survival thus, creating an air where individuality is taken to the extreme without recognition to the ideal that man is a being with others. Ayn Rand (1964: 43) observes that:

Love and friendship are profoundly personal, selfish values; love is an expression and assertion of self-esteem, a response to one's own values in the person of another. One gains a profoundly personal, selfish joy from the mere existence of the person one loves. It is one's own personal, selfish happiness that one seeks, earns and derives from love.

One can gain more than selfish joy when one helps a few friends out of poverty. In this case, it is no more a restricted joy but a joy that stems from love, empathic feelings, and human concerns. Individual poverty must be fought individually and global poverty must be fought collectively. However, it must be clear that the collective will is the will of individual men with one aim, to eradicate poverty. Thus, collective



will is a greater possibility when individuals take responsibility for their existence.

### Conclusion

Poverty is a deficit of human basic needs of life both material and immaterial which are necessary for an authentic existence. Irrespective of social pressures, individuals hold the responsibility of taking themselves to the higher ladder of wealth and prosperity. However, it is the position of this paper that poverty ought to be seen as a human common enemy. Hence, each individual owe it as a duty to strive to complement the other by tackling the challenges of poverty head-on through the instrumentality of the human collective will. The paper also holds the position that poverty exists in the world because of human actions and, only human actions stemming from the will can lead to the eradication of poverty. Finally, it is instructive that some of the things that are very important in life have ontological underpinning. The paper demonstrates this by showing how the human will, which is abstract, has a relationship with poverty. The same can be said about the various known economic systems which are all ontologically connected to the will of humans. Ontology, therefore, cannot be ignored or disparaged if humans must get at the root of global poverty and overcome same.

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