Philosophical Interpretations and the Pursuit of Peace

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Introduction: The Need for Interpretations

Philosophy as a discipline is conceived differently by philosophers, but a theme that runs through the diverse conceptions of philosophy is that it is a rational investigation into the fundamental principles of existence in its diverse manifestations. It studies the nature, causes, underlying principles as well as general and fundamental problems of existence. Hence, the concern of philosophy has been described as the pursuit of "crucial truths" (Horowitz, 2007: 6) or fundamental truths about reality. We may understand reality to mean everything in existence, and this includes humankind and its society. Working with this broad understanding of the enterprise of philosophy, we may go a step further to say that one of the essential ways philosophers seek for crucial truths is through what Sellars describes as "rational sizing up" (see Horowitz, 2007: 1) of relevant issues or through a critical analysis of fundamental assumptions or beliefs about reality or any aspect of it. This perspective of what philosophy is and how it goes about its enterprise is consistent with the popular view that philosophy is essentially a highly critical and analytic discipline that aims to uncover fundamental truths about reality.

Indeed, reality, be it natural or social, often presents us with a myriad of befuddling events and situations that we need to clarify and come to terms with. It is in these situations that we begin to raise such questions as what actually happened? how, when, or why an event to place or what is the significance or true nature of a given phenomenon? Providing adequate answers to these questions often require that we interpret or explain the situation, thing, event or phenomenon in question in ways that would facilitate its adequate understanding. Hence, when philosophers study or 'size up' any social phenomenon or aspect of nature in a rational way using such method as analysis, criticism, speculation or reconstruction, the objective is usually to interpret the object of study in a way that would render it more intelligible and meaningful. Perhaps it is because of this understanding that Karl Marx contends that the primary concern of philosophers has been

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to interpret the world, leaving the challenge of changing it unattended to (1845). In his opinion, the challenge that remains, and which should be of primary concern to philosophers, is that of how to change the world for the better. Nonetheless, it is clear that to improve upon any phenomenon, be it natural or social, it must first be correctly interpreted in ways that would facilitate its comprehensive understanding. Given the above, this paper examines the nature of philosophical interpretations in order to expose how philosophers embark upon the interpretation of concepts and phenomena. Indeed, philosophical interpretations have two clear functions that are consistent with what has been stated above with regards to Marx. The first is to render the world more intelligible and meaningful while the second is to provide a suitable epistemological or theoretical platform for addressing challenges and problems confronting humans.

It is also important that concepts and phenomenon are correctly interpreted for a number of other reasons. For one, many people employ concepts without having a good grasp of their full meanings and implications. Such concepts as knowledge, development, democracy, peace and conflict are employed on a daily basis by people, many of whom, upon demand, are unable to define, explain or interpret them in ways that would be acceptable. Besides, people often employ concepts in very different and sometimes conflicting ways that leaves one unsure of what they actually connote or denote. A typical example is the idea of social peace. While scholars of the pacifist orientation claim that peace is essentially disrupted or destroyed by war and other forms of violence, advocates of war argue that war and the use of violence is often necessary to maintain peace in society. In this case, while it is ironical that both the protagonists and antagonists of war may claim that they are for peace, it seems that they have different interpretations of its nature, how it can be achieved and what its purposes are (Hansen, 1987: 2-33). Drawing an illustration from the current crisis ravaging Syria under President Bashar al-Assad, peace for government forces means the continued acceptance of the oppressive and undemocratic regime of Assad, while for the revolutionary forces, it is the existing oppressive and undemocratic rule of Assad that is the cause of the civil war. For the revolutionaries in Syria, anything short of the overthrow of the regime is perceived as inimical to peace since for them, peace among other things means the institution of true democracy. Evidently, Assad has a conception of social peace that is contrary to the one held by many of the people of Syria.

Indeed, much of the problems confronting humans in their social relationships, especially with regards to conflicts and violence, is borne out of or at least exacerbated by communication gaps, misunderstanding, misinterpretations or ascribing conflicting interpretations to concepts, events or phenomenon. Hence, for any effort to enhance social peace by preventing, managing or resolving social conflicts to be effective, it must include an adequate means of interpreting relevant concepts, phenomenon or events. It is for this and other aforementioned reasons that this paper focuses on the nature of philosophical interpretations. The essential
objective is to elucidate some of the major methods or approaches of interpretations employed by philosophers and specify those that can aid the quest for social peace.

**Nature and Forms of Philosophical Interpretation**

Generally speaking, the term "interpretation" refers to the ascription or establishment of the meaning or significance of something. This usually involves the explanation of what the thing to be interpreted means or implies in an attempt to render it more intelligible or to facilitate a better and accurate understanding of it. An interpretation of a concept or phenomenon, simply put, may be "one of several, equally well-justified account of it which can be given" (McCullagh, 2000: 48). For an interpretation to be accurate or adequate, it must be embarked upon in a fair and objective way that would not be misleading and devoid of any form of bias or wrong assumption. To ensure this, there is the art, theory or science of interpretation, which is known by the technical term, hermeneutics. This seeks to set out the rules guiding the discipline of interpretation and provide methodological directions to all interpretative sciences so as to avoid, as much as possible, arbitrariness in interpretations and also facilitate an adequate understanding of the concepts or phenomenon being interpreted (Grondin, 1995: 1). Although hermeneutics can be traced back to ancient Greece, it gained renewed interest in Germany during the modern era with the displacement of the responsibility for interpreting the Bible from the Church to individual Christians generally. It eventually flowered in the philosophical hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer in the 20th Century (Forster, 2007: 1).

There are a number of major presuppositions that are central to the art of interpretation (Forster, 2007: 3-5). One is that the meaning of words depends on their linguistic usage such that interpretation is fundamentally a matter of determining the linguistic usage of words. This idea was discussed in some details by Wittgenstein's account of the use theory of meaning. Another presupposition holds that interpretation must deploy a detailed knowledge of a text's historical, geographical, and other relevant contexts. This suggests that items for interpretation need to be located within its relevant social contexts for them to be interpreted properly.

A third presupposition is holistic in nature, suggesting that no concept, phenomenon or event can be effectively interpreted in isolation from other related concepts, phenomena or events. In the case of texts, it is held that the parts of a text must be interpreted in the light of the whole text while this in turn can only be adequately interpreted within the context of the author's broad ideas as well as other related texts. This invariably generates the problem of "hermeneutical circle" which is that if interpreting parts of a text requires interpreting the whole of the text, then, given that interpreting the whole obviously also requires interpreting the parts, how can interpretation ever be achieved at all?

A means of resolving the problem of the hermeneutical circle, offered by Herder Schleiermacher, holds that:

> since understanding is not an all-or-nothing matter but instead something that comes in
degrees, it is possible to interpret the parts of a text in sequence with some measure of adequacy, thereby achieve a measure of understanding of the whole text, then deploy that measure of understanding of the whole text in order to refine one's understanding of the parts, thereby refining one's understanding of the whole text, and so on (in principle, indefinitely) (Forster, 2007: 6).

Focusing more specifically on the notion of philosophical interpretation, which is our primary concern in this paper, it refers to how meanings are assigned to concepts, symbols, objects, practices, events and processes in an attempt to facilitate their adequate understanding and render the world more intelligible. In this regard, a wide array of approaches are adopted by philosophers. These include the analytical, deductive, inductive and functional approaches to interpretation. Before we proceed to examine each of these approaches of philosophical interpretation, it should be noted that often, the nature of what is to be interpreted determines the form of interpretation that would be most suitable. In this wise, there are occasions wherein it becomes imperative to employ more than one of the aforementioned approaches in order to arrive at a comprehensive, holistic or integrated understanding of the subject of interpretation. This very much remains within the purview of philosophy, which has been described as the discipline best suited to provide such all-inclusive understanding (Uroh, 1999: 35-37; Koch, 1960: 65).

**Analytical Interpretation**

The method of analysis, which has always been a central philosophical method, was made prominent in the 20th Century by the logical positivists (Ashby, 1985: 493-494). They argue that the object of philosophy is to clarify thoughts and elucidate ideas in order to make concepts and the propositions in which they feature clear and also to sharply delimit thoughts that are blurred or opaque. Analysis, in its simplest form, involves breaking down the item to be interpreted into its simplest components or elements in order to gain knowledge or a better understanding of the issue in which the concept is involved (Beaney, 2013). The technical term for what is to be analysed is *analyandum* while that into which it is analysed is the *analysans*. The analysandum is usually more complex than the analysans, and a primary purpose of an analytical interpretation is to identify or determine the simpler concepts that are involved or embodied in the analysandum.

This interpretative approach is usually used to elucidate the meaning of concepts or propositions and render them more intelligible. Thus, it is described as the approach of conceptual analysis. When this approach is employed to clarify an idea, the objective would be to identify all the components or elements of the concept as well as other concepts that the concept to be analysed imply or those other concepts that imply the concept that is being interpreted. Indeed, analysis of concepts or the propositions in which they feature often show that concepts are more complex than they appear to be, and to have a full understanding of concepts or the propositions in which they feature, it is essential that we identify all the simpler concepts embodied in them. For
instance, when analysed, the seemingly simple proposition "X is a sister" consists of the following ideas or propositions: 1. X is female; 2. There are two people, A and B, who are parents to X; 3. There is also a Y of whom A and B are also parents. Using the concept of state as another example, the approach of conceptual analysis would show that its meaning necessarily involves such elements as geographical location, citizens, sovereignty, government and legal system. Likewise, a conceptual analysis of social peace would establish that its meaning necessarily include the elements of physical security, good governance, economic wellbeing, and the emotional tranquility of people in society.

For an analytical interpretation to be adequate, the following preconditions must be fulfilled (Chatterji, 1979: 12-13):

1. The analysandum and analysans must have exactly the same meaning.
2. While it is essential that the verbal phrases or sentences expressing the analysandum and analysans be synonymous, it is also necessary for the two to be different, otherwise they would be a mere tautology.
3. The analysans must clearly mention concepts not mentioned in analysandum.
4. The concepts explicitly mentioned in the analysans that are not mentioned in the analysandum are spoken of as parts, components or elements of the latter.

However, while this mode of interpretation may be effective for rendering concepts and propositions meaningful, it may not be adequate in an attempt to correctly ascribe meaning to human actions or social practices where such issues as the reasons and intentions for the relevant actions or social practices would have to be considered. Hence, they require an inductive or functional interpretation. These would be discussed shortly.

Deductive Interpretation

Virtually all philosophers, especially of science, agree that one of the primary objectives of science is to facilitate an understanding of nature, and this objective is achieved, in a fundamental sense, with the use of scientific theories and laws. These are believed to offer an adequate means of interpreting events, processes and things in the natural world. When these are interpreted, inferences are made about the phenomena being interpreted in ways that facilitate an adequate understanding of their significance or meaning. More specifically, scientific theories are considered to constitute complex deductive systems that offer adequate interpretations for the world of nature in a way that renders it more intelligible and predictive. In line with one of the assumptions central to the art of interpretation earlier mentioned, which is that the meaning of words depends on their linguistic usage, advocates of the deductive interpretation of the natural world, known as the formalists contend that scientific theories presuppose "a specific theory of language which recognises meanings only within the context of syntax and reference" (Aigbodioh, 1997: 83).

Deductive interpretations are very helpful in coming to terms with the natural world by offering an avenue or means of understanding the true nature of any given natural object, event or process. What may be considered to
be a good account of the structure of an adequate deductive interpretation is derived from C.G. Hempel's account of the nature of scientific explanations (1970: 246-247). This is so as the primary objective of explaining or interpreting a natural phenomenon is basically to facilitate an understanding of its meaning, significance or essence. To the extent that both explanations and interpretations consist of a set of statements constructed to clarify the meaning, nature or significance of a natural phenomenon, they may be considered as having the same objectives. Within the context of a deductive interpretation, this set of statements would be of two broad categories: the first includes statements that describe the antecedent conditions of the phenomenon to be interpreted or explained. The second would include general law-like statements, and a synthesis of the two would constitute the necessary and sufficient conditions for the occurrence of the phenomenon that is being interpreted or explained. In other words, the phenomenon under scrutiny would be logically entailed by the two categories of statements.

It is important to note that the deductive form of interpretation is the same as what is often described as the causal explanation of natural phenomena. This is to the extent that a basic idea of causation holds that the cause of a phenomenon consists of the set of conditions that are both necessary and sufficient for it to come into being. Hence, once the cause is in place, the phenomenon can be effectively predicted to come into being. The underlying assumption of causal interpretation is that an adequate understanding of a phenomenon must begin with an understanding of its cause.

Hence, a causal interpretation accounts for, describes or explains a phenomenon in terms of the factors or events that constitute the cause of the concept or phenomenon to be interpreted in order to facilitate its adequate understanding. In this regard, the cause of a phenomenon may be described as the conglomeration of "all the events that significantly altered the probability of the occurrence of the event being explained" (MacCullagh, 2000: 29). Put differently, the notion of cause may be described as the set of factors that are necessary and sufficient to bring about the phenomenon that is being interpreted.

**Inductive Interpretations**

While deductive interpretation is quite effective for coming to terms with things, events and processes in nature and as such is accepted in the natural or physical sciences where explanations, in the final analysis, are achieved through the identification of causal or correlational antecedents, it is not very successful in many of the social sciences and historical disciplines (Aigbodioh, 1997: 89-90). This is because it is often practically difficult if not altogether impossible to establish strict causal or correlational antecedents of events or actions in human affairs. Hence, inductive interpretation is more acceptable in this domain. Inductive interpretation seeks to ascribe meaning to events, human actions or any social phenomenon by identifying the general laws, usually statistical in nature, that render the phenomenon to be interpreted probable. The structure of this mode of interpretation is that given a general law and some antecedent
conditions, the event being interpreted is likely to have taken place (Aigbodioh, 1997: 89-90). Indeed, the structure of inductive interpretation is similar to that of deductive interpretation with the essential difference between the two being in the nature of the general law appealed to. While deductive interpretations feature general scientific laws affirming that in all cases satisfying certain conditions, some given events are certain to follow, the general statements appealed to in inductive interpretations are only statistical or probabilistic in nature. They affirm that in cases satisfying certain conditions, some specified kinds of events are likely to take place with a high degree of probability. This inference is usually made on the basis of the past observations that under given conditions, certain kinds of events have been seen to follow. In essence, inductive interpretations of events, especially in the human domain, attribute meanings to them and render them more intelligible in terms of the factors or reasons that underlie them and which also increase the probability that they would take place.

Take as an example, the case of a female political office holder in Nigeria that is accused of corruptly enriching herself by inflating the cost of purchasing official vehicles by over M100 million. This can be interpreted and rendered more intelligible in terms of the general probabilistic statement that in a society devoid of any social security system or welfare scheme for the elderly, there is the high probability that people that occupy political offices would exploit their offices to guarantee a measure of social security and economic wellbeing for themselves during their old age through corrupt means. Alternatively, the incidence of corruption described above, may be interpreted or given meaning in terms of the general probabilistic statement that there is a high probability that political office holders would engage in corrupt practices in a society that lacks administrative structures that effectively prevents corruption and a legal system that effectively prosecutes and punishes corrupt political/public office holders. Hence, with such general probabilistic statements as above, coupled with the empirical fact that Nigeria is indeed a country that is devoid of social security or welfare scheme, an administrative structure that prevents corruption as well as a legal system that effectively prevents and punishes corruption, the action by the political office holder in question is rendered more intelligible and probable.

With specific reference to issues bordering on social peace and effective prevention, management or resolution of conflicts, the inductive mode of interpretation can be effective as it provides valuable insights into the reasons underlying or that render given human actions and social events more probable. It may be employed to highlight or articulate the predisposing factors that render specified human actions or social events more probable or likely to have taken place. With such insights provided by inductive interpretations, it becomes possible to at least substantially reduce the probability of, say, a conflict degenerating into violence by undermining those factors that are known, by induction, to predispose or increase the probability that certain conflict situations would degenerate into violence. For example, this is the kind of interpretation that is presupposed in the early warning system of
preventing violent conflicts, which is an organised mechanism for identifying, measuring, and monitoring the progression of conflict in society. It works by being on the look-out for those signs, indicators, signals, red alarm, warnings, cautions that a situation is fast degenerating into conflict or violence. In essence, it seeks to identify the existence of those factors that increases the probability that people would, for instance, resort to violence. Let me illustrate how the inductive interpretation can be employed to prevent violent conflict: with the general probabilistic statement that "there is a high probability that people would resort to various forms of violence in an attempt to protect their rights and enhance their social well being under conditions of social injustice resulting or manifesting in economic deprivations and endemic poverty". Given the reality of social injustice that has resulted in severe economic deprivations and widespread poverty in Nigeria, the probability is high that people would resort to various forms of violence such as terrorism and violent protests as are being witnessed today. Hence, by this inductive interpretation, it can easily be inferred that to undermine the kind of social violence being experienced in Nigeria today, there is the need to address the antecedent and predisposing condition of social injustice, economic deprivations and poverty.

Functional Interpretation
A functional interpretation seeks to interpret concept or phenomenon in terms of the way it is employed, the purpose it serves, or the role it plays in nature, society or in human life. This interpretation is very prominent in such fields as anthropology, psychology and sociology where it is usually employed to clarify human activities and practices, as well as our social institutions. Functional interpretation is a form of teleological explanation that seeks to render an event or action meaningful in terms of the purpose or end it serves, or the goal towards which it is directed. This form of interpretation is essentially different from the deductive/causal or inductive interpretation that seeks to ascribe meaning to a phenomenon by reference to the factors that brought it about, that is, its causes or those that render it more probable. Rather, it explains events or actions in terms of the purpose, end or goal which it seeks to achieve.

By way of example, functional interpretation is commonly employed to define, analyse, explain or interpret and clarify the significance of religion (see Cline, 2013), that is, how it helps us survive in the world. Within the context of religion as an example, a functional interpretation of religion would focus on the role religion plays in the mental, emotional and psychological life of believers or its role or impact on society or how religion is practiced in society. While the former may be described as the psychological dimension of the functional interpretation of religion, the latter may be rightly construed as the sociological dimension of the functional interpretation of religion. The psychological dimension is encountered in the works of such scholars as Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx (see Freud, 1928; Marx, 1974) and its sociological dimension is found in the writings of such sociologists as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber (see Weber, 2002).
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When a phenomenon is interpreted functionally, the focus would most likely be to show how it facilitates or can enhance the wellbeing of the individuals affected by it or that of society, humanity or nature as a whole. It is in this regard that the functional interpretation of religion, as an example, is to show how religion can help people to survive and enhance their wellbeing in the world. As such, the phenomenon of religion may be explained or interpreted in terms of its emotional, psychological or sociological functions.

Indeed, apart from religion, there are a lot of social practices and institutions that are best understood by interpreting them functionally as their significances can only be fully apprehended through an understanding of the roles they play either in the life of specific individuals or in the interaction among people in society, or between people and the rest of nature. Such social institutions include marriage, family, education, and morality. For instance, an adequate interpretation of the social institution referred to as a nuclear family that would facilitate its full comprehension would go beyond a mere description of its basic components to also give an account of the role it plays in the life of its individual members as well as society as a whole. Hence, apart from describing the nuclear family as a social institution that consist of parents and children, its functional interpretation would go further to identify its role to include procreation and rearing of children, regulation of sexual behavior, socialisation of children, and the provision of social and emotional support to its members.

Turning again to the phenomenon of religion, the obvious upsurge of religious violence in recent times makes it imperative to correctly interpret how religion operates in both individual and social life with a view of showing how it can or has been used to either enhance or undermine social peace. This requires a functional interpretation that would specify the role religion plays in the mental, emotional, and psychological lives of believers. The understanding provided by such functional interpretation would provide an adequate framework for handling the phenomenon of religion in ways that would accentuate its positive social impact while the negative roles are undermined. For instance, an understanding of the role of religion specified in Freud's explanation of religion as a type of neurosis that may engender the kind of religious violence we are now experiencing in contemporary society would provide a knowledge base for preventing religious activities and affiliations from degenerating into any form of neurosis that would engender violence. On the positive side, a functional interpretation may also include an account of how religion helps to come to terms with the vagaries of life, offers succor in adversity, thereby preserving mental health in a chaotic world, and provides spiritual guidance and moral instructions that can facilitate peaceful co-existence.

**Conclusion**

For any effort at enhancing social peace to be effective, it must correctly interpret human actions and social practices as many of the conflicts that degenerate into violence are either occasioned or exacerbated by misconceptions, misinterpretations, misunder-
standing or communication gaps. Hence, the correct interpretation of social practices and human actions is imperative in peace studies. It is for this and other reasons that this paper has examined the nature and approaches to philosophical interpretation. Of the analytical, deductive, inductive and functional approaches or forms of interpretation, the inductive and functional approaches have been identified as the most useful for interpreting social practices and human actions while the analytical mode of interpretation can also be very helpful in interpreting basic concepts and propositions. The deductive method is most useful in the natural sciences but not very helpful in the social and historical sciences.

References