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Emmanuel Mounier's Personalism, the dignity of the human person and the crisis of values in Mozambican society

Abstract

In the face of the socio-political and economic crisis that characterised the 20th century, Emmanuel Mounier's ethics of personalism (1905-1950) was characterised by resistance to the absorption of the human will in the hands of collectivism in defending the value of the uniqueness of the human person. Mounier adopted such ideas based on the Kantian ethical perspective of treating all human beings as ends in themselves and not merely as means to satisfy other people's desires and interests. However, although we are in a century in which, through the use of reason, man has achieved many accomplishments for the wellbeing of humanity, he has not been able to solve the greatest challenges posed by the moral crisis that he himself has caused. In most situations, human reason has been and still is used to the disadvantage of other human beings. For these reasons, using a qualitative-hermeneutical approach, through an analysis of the current literature, this article aims to discuss the crisis of moral values in Mozambican society, within the context of Emmanuel Mounier's philosophical personalism.

Keywords: Personalism; lynching; human dignity.



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1. Introduction

Before discussing the subject of personalism (from Latin, *persona*, which means person or personality), it is important to highlight the existence of many types of personalisms, as there are “a dozen personalist doctrines that, in essence, have nothing in common, if not the word ‘person’” (Williams and Bengtsson, 2013 and Martain, 1947). Thus, of the different types of existing personalisms, it is also important to note that this doctrine presents, as its value and its supreme reality, the human person, created in the image and likeness of God, focusing on its meaning, uniqueness, inviolability and its relational and community dimension (Williams and Bengtsson 2013). Emmanuel Mounier (1967, p. 84) supports this position by explaining that,

A person is a spiritual being constituted as such by a mode of subsistence and independence in his being; it feeds this subsistence by adhering to a hierarchy of values freely adapted, assimilated and experienced by taking a responsible position and constantly converting; in this way, it unites all its activity in freedom and develops, in addition, through creative acts, the uniqueness of its vocation, [as the image and likeness of God].

The German philosopher Hans Jonas (1903-1993) relies on a similar idea to also deal with the “image” of man to be preserved. In essence, for this thinker, images are used by man to represent and interpret the world and himself. Thus, the use of the term “image” is significant and, in a way, expresses a religious background of Judeo-Christian spirituality, in which “man is made in the image of God”. Image production supposes a distinction between the object that serves as a “model” and the image that is produced from it.

Thus, in the philosophy of religion, it is assumed that the object is God and the image is man, because there is an image only when the property of similarity is present, and this similarity is produced intentionally. That is to say, an image is always an analogy and not an identity of someone or something in that the object is an image of the natural thing, but the natural thing is not an image of the object. Thus, similarity fulfills, therefore, a function in the field of knowledge, as a criterion for adapting the image of the represented thing.

From the above, it is clear that because personalists are interested in investigating the experience, state and dignity of the human person, they consider the human person to be the image of God, the starting point for philosophical reflection at the epistemological and ontological level. Thus, philosophical personalism (which will be the basis for this work) is understood to be a current of thought, developed in the philosophy of religion, which recognizes the human person as being the supreme creative reality with high spiritual value existing in the universe. This current of thought considers the whole world to be the manifestation of the creativity of a supreme entity, which is God, and the greatest expression of that (divine) creativity is manifested in its image, which is the human person (Zaverszhenets, 2003, p. 20).

2. Origin of Mounier's personalism

Considering that, for Mounier, man is in constant construction, becoming truly a person is not reduced to the fact that each person is born and exists as a human being. On the contrary, he understands that becoming truly a person is a reality that coincides with the movement of human history in search of a civilized way of living among humans. Thus, Mounierian personalism appears as a response to the socio-political, economic and financial crises that took place between 1929 and 1933, in almost all of Europe, in the face of the offenses of fascism and

totalitarianism to the dignity of the human person, represented as an image and likeness of God. In this situation, the personalists understood this crisis not so much at the political or economic level, but at the humanitarian level. This led Mounier to use the Socratic revolt, through Christianity, to rescue human values that had been usurped from the human person by the political systems in force at the time (Zaverzhenets, 2003). To this end, like his fellow French personalists, Mounier "fought against the disorder established by Nazism and Fascism, [in the same way] he was taken prisoner by German forces, suffered several condemnations and deprivations, but he fought with all vigor" in defense of ideals that he believed would benefit the human person (Silveira 2012, p. 3).

It is for this reason that philosophical personalism is characterized by the defense of the rights of free and creative human beings, in a situation of inhuman behavior, with a view to combating political systems of fixed ideas that violate the freedom of human persons and their development. In these types of political systems, it is expected that individuals will be able to adapt their life plans to the interests of their respective states and find, in them, the support necessary for their survival. For this reason, Mounier argues that in situations of monolithic states of this nature, the human person cannot be characterized as a subject free to act according to his own interests and plans, but rather, according to the plans drawn up by his respective state.

For him, political movements of this nature had their greatest expression from the impersonalist ideas that dominated the century of enlightenment and romanticism, manifested in the form of pantheism and idealism, from Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) to Georg WF Hegel (1770-1831). Taking Hegel's absolute idealism as a reference, it appears that this political system defended the state as the embodiment of the perfect idea of the divine on earth. The implementation of this thought had negative consequences for the society of the time because, starting from the Hegelian and later Marxist idea of state perfection, which compared to divine perfection, it was concluded that the decisions that the states made could not be questioned or challenged. This idea arose from the assumption that if the state is compared to God, and God is perfect, then the state is also perfect. For this reason, any and all decisions that come from it cannot and should not be questioned by the fact that human beings are imperfect and thus dependent on both God and the state for their existence and survival.

At the level of their implementation, these doctrines were later transformed into impersonalist forms of materialism whose aim was the creation of Marxism. This doctrine considered man to be an essentially collectivist being. In turn, collectivism had, as an end, the emergence of impersonalist historical determinism that argued that human destiny and its development were previously determined by the political nature of man. Thus, man simply needed to obey the dictates established by current political structures, because, like God, they had prior knowledge of the end of history, which sought to seek the good of humanity. However, these two doctrines, namely Marxism and collectivism, contributed to the emergence and support of totalitarianism in the 20th century, manifested through political systems such as Nazism and Leninism, leading to the subordination of the human will to the interests of political parties and systems prevailing at the time.

3. Mounier's Response in Defense of Human Dignity

In response to the problems presented above, Mounierian philosophical personalism was characterized by resistance to the absorption of the human will, through collectivism, arguing in favour of the value of the uniqueness of the human person. Mounier adopted this idea based on Kantian ethics, which demands that human beings be treated as an end in themselves, and not as a means to serve the pursuit of the interests and desires of other people, external to the subject in question (Kant, 2012). It is for this reason that Mounier's personalism argues that "the state,

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political parties and other institutions adjacent to the state exist to serve the interests of their citizens and not the other way around” (Williams and Bengtsson 2013).

However, the rejection of collectivism, materialism and deterministic idealism does not mean that personalism would be in favor of individualism. In turn, personalism was also opposed to this doctrine because individualism was also the result of rationalism and romanticism, which ignored the promotion of values of solidarity and healthy interpersonal relationships for the good coexistence between humans. In doing so, philosophical personalism also rejected utilitarianism, as this doctrine used people as instruments to be used for the benefit of others. In this sense, what personalism approves and encourages is the fact that people voluntarily seek to be useful to each other through charity and solidarity. It is for this reason that Mounier argues that while “the first condition of individualism is the centralization of the individual in himself, the first condition of personalism is decentralization, in order to place him in front of the open perspectives of personal life” (quoted Mounier by Williams and Bengtsson, 2013).

Karol Wojtyła (2005), later to become Pope John Paul II, supports the position defended by Mounier for criticizing the extremes of individualism and collectivism, arguing that while the biggest mistake of individualism is the fact that it places the individual good above the common good, of the collectivity, trying to subordinate the collectivity to themselves and use it for their individual good, the biggest mistake of collectivism is the fact that it focuses on the alleged good for all, subordinating people to dictatorial political systems, in such a way that their true good is excluded, making them victims of the community. For Pope São João Paulo II (2005), this resulted in producing the worst possible fruits of totalitarianism, to the detriment of the dignity of the human person.

Faced with these crises, the group of personalists, of which Mounier was part, posited the human person as the criterion by which the solution to the crisis should be created. In his article “Refaire la Renaissance”, which appeared in the first issue of the magazine *Esprit* (1932), he proposed the need to separate/dissociate the spiritual world from the materialist bourgeois world. For Mounier, materialism - bourgeoisie - was the result of a growing individualism that society has experienced since the Renaissance, and this individualism has gradually perverted spiritual values. Thus, Mounier understands that when human beings do not have love or know what the meaning of their existence is, because they have a lot of power, they “become hunters of properties and comfort” (Deweert, 2013, p. 8).

To solve these problems, Mounier stresses the importance of the individual's spiritual world, denying Karl Marx's idea of dialectical materialism (1818-1883) in which the end of history was understood to be the creation of a paradise on earth, with a view to resolving the friction and economic imbalances that existed between the rich and the poor, while causing injustices in society.

However, as we can see through Pope Leo XIII (1810-1903), Karl Popper (1902-1994), Friedrich Hayek (1899-1992), Michael Oakeshott (1901-1990), Pope John Paul II (1920 -2005), and by Mounier himself, among others, the implementation of these ideas produced the worst results in politics of the 20th century in terms of the violation of the dignity and freedom of the human person (Arendt cited by Souki, 2006). For Mounier, the only and authentic way to make progress in society is only by transcending these situations, and not waiting for the realization of a paradise on earth.

To achieve that, Mounier argues that the traditional political and religious reactions of the time were not the solution to the problem. There was a need for an authentic revolution that would involve the creation of a new humanism. This new humanism demanded a constant and open dialogue between the situation and the society in which each one existed. In this dialogue, the

human person should be characterized by the responsibility that he has to the society in which he exists, to other human and non-human beings, to nature and to the destiny of all humanity (Bosa, 2008 and Resende, sd). It is for this reason that this new humanism is “based on an existentialist philosophy in which personal awakening coincides with community awakening. This philosophical attitude includes the denial of individualism, the refusal of nihilism and the rejection of the corporatist spirit” (Mariano, 2009).

According to Jaison Bosa (2008, p. 38), Mounier understands that “man cannot live in and with the world in a relationship of indifference, inauthenticity and numbness. It is necessary to wake up. [This] awakening begins in childhood and [...] is not intended to mold the child to conformity to the social environment or the doctrines of the state”. It is for this reason that Mounier (2004, p. 101), argues that “a theory of action is not [...] an appendix to personalism, it is [yes] its central chapter”. In this way, Mounier shares the same feeling with Paulo Freire, when the latter argues that for people to be agents of transformation in the society where they are, they need to learn to question and problematize all the situations that happen around them. For Freire (1985, p. 70), “The more (...) they problematize as beings in the world and with the world, the more they will feel challenged. Challenged, they understand the challenge in the very action of capturing [...] it on a plane of totality, and not as something petrified. The resulting understanding tends to become [...] critical, therefore, increasingly desalienated”.

After this questioning, like Mounier, Freire argues that these individuals need to be the agents of transformation they wish to see for the world in which they find themselves, because “there is no liberation to be done with passive men and women. There is a need for awareness and intervention in the world” (Freire cited by Pereira, 2012). In view of this discussion on Emmanuel Mounier's thought, it remains to reflect on the relevance that his thought would have for Mozambican society. This will be the chief focus in the following paragraphs.

4. The relevance of Mounier's thinking to Mozambican society

At the end of his book ‘Personalism’ (1949), Emmanuel Mounier argues that his greatest desire was to see the word personalism forgotten. Mounier (1950, p. 133) speaks of this situation in the following terms:

The positions outlined on these pages are debatable and subject to review. These are free to not have been thought of in the application of received ideologies, but they were discovered progressively, with the condition of the man of our time. Every personalist can only hope that they will follow the progress of this discovery and that the word “personalism” will be forgotten one day, because there will no longer be a need to attract attention to what should be the very banality of man.

This position is curiously provocative and apparently contradictory to the author's own thinking because, according to Carlos da Silva (2012, p. 3), Mounier “dedicated his entire existence to the defense of the [human] person. Through his community personalism, [he] intended to awaken people so that they would live their embodied presence with dignity, harmonizing and helping to humanize the world”. These activities were carried out while he lived his human fervor and his Christian conviction in defense of human life, [fighting] against the oppressive systems of the time”. Seen in this perspective, Mounier's desire to see the word personalism forgotten is due to the fact that it appeared to respond to the “banality of man”, in the use of socio-political and economic structures existing at the time to torture and kill beings humans. This means that, once there were no more violations of the dignity of the human person, there would be no more need for the existence of personalism.

However, in the times in which we live, mainly in our country, this dream seems to be far from being achieved, since, as Thomas Hobbes would say, in ‘Leviathan’, the Mozambican has become the predator or wolf of other Mozambicans. This position is due to the fact that, in this

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country, there are situations where, for example, the lack of an effective police presence results in many citizens choosing to lynch their own fellow citizens who are caught in the act of theft. In other situations, it appears that there is total insensitivity on the part of many citizens, when, for example, instead of helping or saving an equal human being when he is in trouble, we encounter situations in which many people prefer to ignore such situations, or simply limit themselves to taking pictures and filming to make the occurrence available on social networks. These are extremely depersonalizing situations and need not only reflection, but also a change in actions and behavior, on the part of everyone.

For example, on September 1, 2017, the city of Beira was shocked by the sad news of the death of a night watchman after being attacked by dogs, in the Bairro do Aeroporto (Jornal a Verdade, 30 August 2017). The sad thing about this situation is that while the dogs attacked and killed the guard, there were people at the scene who were filming the event in order to post it on social networks, instead of trying to help and save the guard's life. In fact, in situations of this nature, each of us should feel the moral obligation to care for the well-being of the people around us, because the story that has just been told is no different from the person who doesn't care about the lives of others because his own life is fine. This is symptomatic of a society that has lost the moral values of charity, compassion and solidarity, becoming nihilist by not following any social, political, religious or moral principle for a good moral coexistence between human beings.

The opposite of this is what we would call “commercial charity”, which is also part of the moral crises of Mozambican society. This aspect also needs reflection and behavior change on the part of each Mozambican. For a better understanding of the term 'commercial charity' and its social implications in the country, we will explore this subject in the following paragraphs.

4.1 Commercial charity in Mozambique

In his work *Dalla Proprietá Capitalista Alla Proprietá Umana* (1983), Mounier raises the question of charity and solidarity that we must extend, not only to the needy but also among all human beings, pointing mainly to the duty that each has to help the most needy or poor as one of the assumptions of a good social coexistence. In this debate, he considers that the act of helping the most needy and poor is a duty, because, for him, “the things we possess with an overabundance are due, by natural law, to the livelihood of the poor” (1983, p. 94), hence he argues that “The indigent are the natural recipients of the superfluous of all because the inequality of wealth is an injustice” (1983, p. 94).

This argument finds support in two contemporary thinkers, the first being the American philosopher John Rawls (1921-2002) and the second Pope Benedict XVI. Starting with Rawls, it should be noted that in his works ‘A Theory of Justice’ (1971) and ‘Justice as Equity’ (1985), he supports the moral obligation that we have to share our material goods with the most needy, due to the fact that the talents we possess and use in the acquisition of those goods belong to the whole humanity and not only to us. Despite not addressing the same theme in the context of Kantian moral duty, as Rawls does, in his work ‘Charity in Truth’ (2009), Pope Benedict XVI argues that charity as a moral duty that does not need to be legislated by man, because it is already legislated by the law of divine love, existing in man himself. Thus, he explains that “Because of its close connection with the truth, charity can be recognized as an authentic expression of humanity and as an element of fundamental importance in human relations” (Benedict XVI 2009, p. 3). However, Benedict XVI strives for a charity sustained by the truth, because, “Only in truth does charity shine and can it be authentically lived”, so that it does not fall into mere sentimentality and there is no risk of living love (charity) “in a culture without truth” (Benedict XVI 2009, p. 3).

This reflection is also pertinent for a discussion about personalism because nowadays, mainly in our country and, specifically, in times of natural calamities and shortages, it is urgent to question and, if possible, correct some depersonalizing practices that have been observed in relation to charity towards the most needy. In fact, in most situations, Mozambican society has encountered some charitable practices at the corporate level where, in the name of social responsibility, observed in many situations, we find companies and other institutions that, when they wish to make a donation, or undertake an act of charity, tend to advertise such an act through the media. In other situations, we find companies that, after having encouraged their employees to donate blood, for example, it is observed that the institution capitalizes these moments, when instead they should perform an act from mere moral and business obligation, to acquire cheap publicity in the press. In this sense, as Michael Sandel (2012) would say, such acts are morally questionable because these companies do the right thing, which is charity, for the wrong reason, which is self-promotion, which leads us to question whether what they are doing is charity or not.

For these types of situations, Mounier (1983) and the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (2006) alert us to the need to perceive that true charity presupposes the practice of justice, because, as mentioned above, “the surplus to our needs [is the product of our] violence”, because such surpluses should be understood within the limits of the universal destiny of material goods that, prior to that, should be at the service and enjoyment of all, especially the most needy. This means that there is an urgent need to rethink the need not only for companies, but also for each citizen, to put charity in its true place and with its true meaning because, for charity to be true, we must bear in mind the evangelical wisdom of not blowing our own trumpet when giving alms (Matthew 6: 2-3). When this happens, instead of this being true, it ends up becoming morally questionable because we use this, and the people who benefit from it, as being means (mere instruments) to further our personal interests. Seen in this way, charity becomes depersonalizing for those who should benefit from it. This means, once again, that Mozambican society needs to recover the value of charity and solidarity and look at it not because it benefits those who give, but rather because it benefits those who receive, for this to be true.

5. Final remarks

Based on the debate raised here, it is important to note that if Mounier were still alive, he would certainly not be totally disillusioned with his dream of seeing personalism forgotten, as this dream has not yet come true. This observation would be evident not only from the constant tendency of man to want to dominate the other, but also by the fact that there are tendencies towards abandoning a collective ethic in order to adopt an individual ethic. This article reflected on the personalism of Emmanuel Mounier to look at the crisis of moral values, mainly of charity and solidarity within Mozambican society. It was found that the loss of these values has its consequences in the same society.

For this reason, the recommendation that this work offers, mainly for Mozambican society, is that people need to build a society rooted in solid moral bases, embracing a new humanism accompanied by true charity and solidarity, as Mounier suggests, instead of the same people using each other in terms of material, economic, social and political power. In doing so, Mozambican society can be more humane, supportive and healthy, both for the present generation and for future generations.

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