

Violence as Fundamental Moral Principle in Frantz Fanon: A Philosophical Overview

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KEYWORDS: Philosophy, Violence, Fundamental, Moral principle.

Preamble: Why violence at all, since in its concept, it runs counter to dialogue. In its practice, it is corrosive, and mere mentioning of it breeds a kind of fierce feeling that often times posits fundamental moral questions patterning to values. Frantz Omar Fanon, in his reflection on the existential situation of the black Africans under colonialism, presented a somewhat deep rooted but difficult realism that portrayed the true nature of man and human society at large. As a French citizen in a French colony called Antilles, he experienced the dehumanizing nature of colonialism, coupled with its incessant alienation of the blacks from their identity. Consequently, this has led to his vehement approach to decolonizing through a method of psychotherapy, combined with political education, aimed at understanding the social conditions under which the individual thrives in a socio-political system.¹ It is in the light of this that this paper shall embark on a critique of violence as a fundamental principle in Fanon. However, the analytic method shall be employed in breaking down the mechanisms inherent in this work. 'The Wretched of the Earth' published in 1963. This work will be the Centre piece of our study in this course as it relates to the work on Fanon's philosophy that is of interest in our current inquiry.

I. A Brief Frantz Omar Fanon Biography

FRANTZ FANON (1925-1961) is the most influential and widely read of the thinkers that supported the decolonization struggle after the World War II. He was notable for his engagement in the independence struggle of the Algerian people waged against France and the theory or the analysis of the human impulse towards freedom from colonialism. His works were central in African thought because it paid much attention to the roles hybridity and colonization can play in forming humanist, anti-colonial cultures.

He was born in French colony of Martinique on the 20th of July, 1925, by a family that occupied a social position within Martinican society. His father Casmir Fanon was a customs inspector, while his mother Eleanore Medelice owned a hardware store in Fort-de-France, capital of Martinique. So Frantz Fanon was raised in this bourgeoisie background where the level of society stratum strives for assimilation and identity with white French culture. He learnt France's history as his own, until his high school years when he had his first encounter with negritude taught to him by Aime Cesaire, another Martinique critic of European colonization. Fanon left the colony of Martinique in 1943 at the age of 18 to fight with Free French forces in the warring days of the World War II, still torn between assimilation and racial identity that negritude promotes.

After the war he studied psychiatry and medicine at the University of Lyon in France where he encountered racism which enraged him and inspired him to write 'An Essay for the Desalination of Blacks' which later became his first book titled 'Black Skin, White Masks' in 1952.

He no longer felt at home when he returned to the Caribbean after his studies and in 1953 he accepted the job of chief of staff for the psychiatric ward of a French hospital in Algeria. The following year there was an eruption of the Algerian war of independence against France, and Fanon was responsible for treating the psychological distress of the French soldiers. After two years of service, he realized he could not continue aiding France efforts to put down decolonization movements for which he had political loyalty for, so he resigned his position at the hospital. Once officially free from working for the French government in Algeria, he devoted himself to the Algerian struggle for independence. He was based in Tunisia at that time training nurses for the National

Liberation Front (FLN) a body that was fighting for the Algerian independence. He published a lot of articles for the cause of the decolonization movement of the Algerian people. In 1959, Frantz Fanon was made Algerian ambassador to Ghana and with that influence opened up supply route for the Algerian army. But shortly while in Ghana he was diagnosed with leukemia and died shortly in the United States where he was taken for treatment. His body was taken back to Algeria where he was buried.

During his lifetime Fanon was influenced by the works of various philosophers like Hegel, Karl Marx, and Husserl. He also had a friendly relationship with Jean Paul Sartre, whose work on existentialism he admired and found helpful. Sartre wrote the preface on Fanon's book that talked on violence as a fundamental moral principle in the fight for decolonization.

II. The General Notion of Violence X-Rayed

VIOLIEN PREVENTION ALLIANCE (VPA) addresses the problem of violence as defined in the *World report on violence and health* (WRVH), namely:

The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury death, psychological harm, mal-development, or deprivation.²

The WRVH also presents a typology of violence that, while not uniformly accepted, can be a useful way to understand the contexts in which violence occurs and the interactions between types of violence. This typology distinguishes four modes in which violence may be inflicted: physical; sexual; and psychological attack; and deprivation. It further divides the general definition of violence into three sub-types according to the victim-perpetrator relationship.

- **Self-directed violence** refers to violence in which the perpetrator and the victim are the same individual and is subdivided into *self-abuse* and *suicide*.
- **Interpersonal violence** refers to violence between individuals, and is subdivided into *family and intimate partner violence* and *community violence*. The former category includes child maltreatment; intimate partner violence; and elder abuse, while the latter is broken down into *acquaintance* and *stranger* violence and includes youth violence; assault by strangers; violence related to property crimes; and violence in workplaces and other institutions.
- **Collective violence** refers to violence committed by larger groups of individuals and can be subdivided into social, political and economic violence.

Understanding the Variations of Violence in Fanon

Violence in Fanon is understood in five different categories namely: force, physical or psychological injury, aggression, coercion and militancy or radicalism. These are the avenues through which colonialism thrived mostly in Africa. By the application of these corrosive mechanisms stated above, colonialism destroyed the native structures and superimposed its exploitative structures, thereby making the natives enemy of one another. Meanwhile, the success of this venture lies with the following; the relegation of the native's language and imposition of a foreign one among the natives, introduction of colonialist clientele bourgeoisie meant to serve colonial interests, institutionalization of colonial police and barracks meant to quell oppositions from the natives and also to keep the native town in constant fear; and then, introduction of inherent segregation among the native and settlers. In his work "*The Wretched of the Earth*" Fanon summarized these categories of violence in the following statement;

The colonial world is a world cut into two. The dividing line, the frontiers are shown by barracks and police stations. In the colonies, it is the policeman and the soldier who are the official, instituted go-betweens, the spokesmen of the settler and his rule of oppression.³

Fanon also recognized the psychological injury done to the natives in his following statements:

As if to show the totalitarian character of colonial exploitation the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil. Native society is not simply described as a society lacking in values

[alone]...The native is declared insensitive to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values...⁴

But the immobility to which the native is condemned, says Fanon, can only be called in question if the native decides to put an end to the history of colonialism, that is, through a counter violence against the colonizers. This is however the waking stage of what is properly called violence in Fanon. Perhaps we may not be able to go further without mentioning that violence in Fanon narrows down to the concept of decolonization which has been variously interpreted. Hence we could say that violence in Fanon is only a mechanism for decolonization. Decolonization in this respect means “simply the replacing of a certain ‘species’ of men by another ‘species’ of men”.⁵

A new kind of violence is born out of Fanon’s concept of decolonization. This is the kind of realism or violence that was articulated distinctively from the four traditional schools of thoughts in political realism. According to Okoro, this realism considers violence in Fanon from the broad spectrum of altruism, rationality, utility and sense of patriotism. It stresses the positive side of violence which is anchored not on the desire to preserve the self. It considers with the basic tools of reason, the implications accruing to the contra-distinctions between positive and negative violence, as well as in the perpetual application of these violence. Also, it considers the happiness of the greater number in its moral scale. However, it is this kind of violence or realism that Okoro calls alternative violence or “alternative realism”. It is alternative in the sense that;

It does not admit perpetual application for it is capable of being misused or abused. It is only for a specific crisis times in which the possibility of dialogue will either be one sided or not possible at all in sincere practical terms.⁶

Fanon had concurred to this fact earlier on in his work Titled “*Black Skin White Mask*” that,

This kind of violence is meant for a specific crisis period, such period he said, in which skeptical doubt has taken root in the world, when...it is no longer possible to find the sense of nonsense, making it harder to penetrate to a level where the category of sense and nonsense are not yet invoked.⁷

Having said this, he admonished in a bid to stress the situational applicability of alternate violence, “that in no fashion should he undertake to prepare the world that will come later, and that he belonged irreducibly to his time”.⁸

It should be noted that alternate violence (realism) is identifiable with Fanon. Its basic principles stem from Fanon’s entire life project of emancipating the black nations from the shackles of colonialism.

Justifications for Violence in Fanon

A corrosive phenomenon like violence should not be used without good reasons, even though it may be debatable based on the circumstance in which it is used. Fanon’s violence has been identified as arising from two reasons namely, moral and practical reasons.

1. Moral Reasons

Moral reasons behind Fanon’s violence includes to liberate the native’s consciousness and to restore his humanity to him. It is also a natural response to the violence perpetrated by the settler since there is no possibility of dialoguing with a colonist whose mind is set on plundering his victims. Again, it advances as well as revitalizes the already battered value system of the native. Fanon confirms this while identifying the settler’s church in the colonies as one of the mediums for the violence against the natives when he averred that “...it does not call the native to the ways of God; it calls the native to the ways of the white man...”⁹ Besides that, as philosophers, we must ask what constitutes morality for the natives?, since moral laws in their universality also admit relativity of interpretation. Fanon in the light of this would retort that it is simply to put the settler out of the picture.

2. Practical Reasons

This includes; to physically bring down the colonial social, political and economic structures, and also to build solidarity in the struggle for freedom. Freedom within this period of colonialism is needed like air by the natives who are already choked with their far removed dreams of good life which the colonial masters kept flickering on their faces. The need therefore to fight for what rightly belongs to them becomes a sine qua non; no matter what it will cost.

III. Concluding Reflections

It is logically plausible to agree with Gandhi that when an eye begets an eye that the whole world will soon go blind just because of the fierce nature of violence. But it is not factually sound to toe such line since real life experiences have continued to prove that violence is much more a needed heuristic in crisis resolution. For

the records; it was the outbreak of the cold war between the United States and the USSR that led to the dissolution of the bipolar regionalism in the international community and subsequently led to the five major power blocs we have today. From this, the UNO was formed and soon the world became a global village. Consequently the eradication of Trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism ensued. This however led to the rapid spread of liberal ideologies that saw the outage of authoritarian regimes between the 18th and 19th centuries. It continues till today. At least the recent Arab uprising in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain and Syria are all examples of what good violence can do for a people, especially when it has to do with socio-political and cultural emancipation. On a large scale, one may be right if he argues that violence is more expensive than dialogue and that it leads to further violence. This can only be true when violence is subject to constant application. In cases where it comes as a situational principle, it could be more real and result oriented, unlike non-violence or Ahimsa which is more of an ideal. As Sartre said in his preface of the book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, authored by Fanon; “no gentleness can efface the marks of violence; only violence itself can destroy them”.¹⁰ Violence is a more practical principle and a fundamental one in the philosophy of Frantz Fanon.

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