

Insights of Conflict Management Strategies from the Perspectives of Selected Philosophers

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Abstract

This study aims to draw insights and implications on conflict management strategies from selected philosophers. It utilizes textual or content analysis to present and explain what they have to say and offer about conflict management strategies. The study shows that different philosophers have varied approaches and strategies to conflict management among them are yielding, compromising, collaborating, competing, and avoiding. However, they share commonalities such as the discernment and defense of the greater good/common good over individual interests and desires; the discernment and defense of truth, rectitude, and justice over beliefs, feelings, opinions, prejudices, injustice and stereotypes; the principle of not harming others; a preventive approach to conflict management rather than curative. Therefore, philosophy is not something abstract but offers practical strategies to manage conflict. The study is relevant because it is an additional literature on conflict management particularly from the perspective of philosophy considering that there is dearth in the literature. This study recommends that another study be made using different set of philosophers. Also, one may look into leadership or management styles reflected in the philosophy of selected philosophers.

1.0 Introduction

Conflict is a natural circumstance of life. It is intrinsically normal and inevitable. It happens anywhere at anytime between and among individuals, groups, communities, nations, and states (Hocker and Willmont 2011; Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall, 2011). Traditionally, it is viewed as something negative because it entails, pain, suffering, stress, depression, fear and other unlikable thoughts and feelings which lead to low self esteem, low productivity, war and unpleasant consequences. Hence, the management of conflict is vital to leaders, managers, administrators, and to everyone in order to effectively prevent adverse effects from taking place (Covette 2007).

Conflict management refers to an alternative

in which conflicting parties solve problems or issues. It is also the behavior people employ on their analysis of conflict situation. These imply that people have actually choices and options in dealing with conflict. There is no perfect and absolute solution. One can face or confront conflict, one can also avoid it. Others can resolve conflict peacefully others resolve it violently or with use of power or force. It involves a meta-conflict perspective which is the analysis of the conflict situation (Cahn and Abigail, 2007).

Corvette (2007) explains that conflict management is utilizing conflicts constructively. One can approach conflict collaboratively/cooperatively, compromisingly which entail a very positive attitude and perspective. On the other

hand, one can approach conflict in a competing way with the use of force and power but may also entail a positive attitude and perspective which is to end conflict totally.

It must be noted that most researches and literature on conflict management come from the fields of sociology, psychology, business and management. There is a dearth of literature on conflict management from the perspective of philosophy. Besides, most if not all works and texts on philosophy do not categorically and explicitly discuss about conflict management.

2.0 Objective of the Study

Based on the aforementioned reason, the study aims to present, explain, and analyze what some philosophers say and contribute to conflict management particularly on conflict management strategies. In other words, it draws insights and implications on conflict management strategies from the teachings of selected philosophers. This is an additional literature on conflict management in the perspective of philosophy.

3.0 Method

The study utilizes textual or content analysis on the thoughts of selected philosophers and present what they have to say on conflict management strategies. In the analysis, the study specifically employs the hermeneutic circle in which the author reads and analyzes the texts based on commentaries from parts to whole and vice versa drawing insights, themes, and implications. This is a kind of reinterpretation of the philosophies of these selected philosophers. The philosophers presented in this study are Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, Lao Zi, Sun Zi, Machiavelli, Stuart Mill, Hobbes, Sartre, and Rawls. They were randomly

selected from the different periods of the History of Philosophy.

4.0 Results and Discussions

In ancient Philosophy, Socrates and his student Plato have something to say about conflict Management. In Plato's Dialogue "*Crito*" one finds Socrates refusing escape or release from imprisonment and death sentence despite the offer of his affluent student Crito (Magee 2001 and Cahn 2005; and Jowett 2009). The reason of his refusal is simple, he does not want to disobey and violate the laws of Athens or the state because doing so violates Justice which is to do what is right and avoid what is wrong, that is, to follow reason over emotions and desires. He also does not want to violate the social contract represented by the law and the state which for him is the greater good than individual desire (Stumpf and Fieser 2003 and Jowett 2009).

In relation to conflict resolution, Socrates is telling everyone to discern and transcend one's individual interest and desires and aim for the greater good which is the truth and that which is right and for the general welfare which is known by reason alone and not through emotions. It implies that in the analysis of the issue and the problem during mediation, dialogues and arbitration, parties involved including mediators, must not merely depend on opinion, perception, feelings but weigh things, take action or make decisions based on facts, truth and reason. Moreover, parties involved and the mediator must also rationally analyze and discern whether what is disputed about is merely for an individual interest or for the greater or common Good. This requires knowing all sides and angles of the story or issue. One must have an open mind, a listening ear, and the

positive attitude to solve the problem or to look for solutions rather than to get even or to strike back.

For Socrates, the greater good/common good/ the just is to follow the dictates of reason over emotions and human desires, that is, to transcend the emotions and to be directed by reason in ones decision and action. Only reason has access to what is truly Good. The senses and emotions are only up to the level of perceptions and not the Truth/ Good itself (Weiss 1998).

Thus, the example of Socrates implies yielding which means that individuals and groups must yield to the greater Good rather than to individual interests or desires in order to resolve and prevent conflicts. It is to yield to reason rather than to ones emotions. It is not a question of losing or winning an argument but it is a question of following what is right and the truth as well as serving the general welfare through careful rational analysis, deliberation, and dialogue.

Aristotle, the student of Plato, did not categorically and explicitly discuss about conflict management in his works. However, one can draw some insights about conflict management strategy from his moral philosophy particularly in his discussion of virtue. According to him, to be virtuous is to follow the "golden mean", that is to avoid extremes or opposites or it is the practice of moderation or hitting the mean or the intermediate between excess and deficiency (Mann and Dann 2005; Kolak and Martin 2002; a Peterman 2007; Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy and Rowe & Broadie 2002). Too much of something is not good. Lack or insufficiency is also not good. For example, the lack of courage is cowardice which is not good. Too much of courage is rashness or stupidity is also not good for it will jeopardize one's life by exposing

oneself to danger. The intermediate or mean between cowardice and rashness is what Aristotle considered virtue. Another example is, too much sleep is not healthy likewise the lack of sleep. What is good is moderate sleep, that which intermediary between too much sleep and the lack of sleep.

One must remember that conflicts arise due to excess and lack. For instance, if a boss is too strict with the subordinates, then tension arises. Also, if the boss lacks strictness or firmness in dealing with subordinates, it may cause abuse which is also not good. Thus, the Golden Mean of Aristotle implies knowing the excess and lack and avoiding it as much as possible. There is no absolute measure or yardstick in determining the middle path, reason will tell depending on the situation or circumstance. Therefore, dialogue and discernment are required to determine the middle ground and manage conflict.

Rowe & Broadie (2002) also explained that moderation for Aristotle is self restrain or self control. Moderation as self control is obviously an essential strategy to manage conflict. If a person cannot control his anger, greed, lust, and other human passions then he or she can surely harm others and would trigger others to retaliate causing conflict.

Therefore, Aristotle proposes a preventive approach to conflict management through moderation, that is, avoidance of extremes and through self control.

In ancient oriental Philosophy, the philosopher Confucius aims to attain a peaceful and good government because he was weary with the Wars and conflicts that beset his time. One must remember that Confucius was born during the Warring State Period of ancient China. In his search for peace, he needs to establish a peaceful and

good government. To achieve a peaceful and good government, he needs to mold virtuous men as leaders and citizens of the state through education. Education is vital in achieving peace and managing conflict. Confucius did not just mean literacy when he speaks of education, he emphasizes on values formation that is the teaching and inculcating of virtues and molding real gentlemen (Leaman 2000; Kupperman 2001; and Muller). In other words, there should be rigid values/virtues integration in schools, in the family and in the community to manage conflict.

This implies that conflict management is not just a short term strategy or quick solution to conflict but rather conflict resolution is actually a long term process which involves education. It is difficult to observe peace if people do not have in-depth understanding of human dignity, human rights, the value of life, and the meaning of life without proper education and the integration of values in the family, in school, and in the community. In other words, conflict management does not happen only during negotiations or in situations of conflict but it starts far earlier in the education of the young. Confucius' strategy is somehow preventive rather than curative.

Confucius is known for his Golden Rule "Do not do unto others if you do not want others do unto you (Golden Rule). "This implies avoidance as a strategy of conflict resolution. So that people will not harm you, you will not initiate harming them. Avoidance here does not mean doing nothing or ignoring conflict but rather finding a way not to make or cause conflict. This is indeed a preventive posture to conflict.

Though Confucius stressed on virtue and the Golden Rule as principles to prevent conflict, he actually made an exemption. He and his student

Mencius speak of "the rebellion of the rightful soldier" as a duty to attain peace. Should the ruler fail to be virtuous, he ceases to be a ruler and becomes a criminal. Thus, it is the duty of the rightful soldier to lead a revolt to oust the vicious ruler. This idea of Confucius and his student Mencius implies competing as a strategy to conflict resolution to insure that war, violence, and abuses will not be committed there is a necessity to exercise force to repel evil (Yu Lan and Bodee 1949).

Lao Tzu one of the most important figures of Taoism speaks of the Tao as the uncaused cause of the universe. The Tao is infinite and indeterminate thus one cannot fathom the entirety of its being. The only way the human being is able to know and follow the Tao is to know and follow the way of nature. The way of nature is *wu-wei-wu* or simply *wu-wei*, meaning to act by not acting or action by non action. This means not to overdo or under do things, that is, avoiding extremes, the excess and deficiency (Yu Lan and Bodee, 1949). For example, if one over eats, it will make a person obese which is unhealthy. Similarly, if one lacks food or nutrition, one is malnourished.

In relation to conflict management, if a superior, for example, will overscold a subordinate it will cause friction. In the same manner, if a superior lacks or does not scold a subordinate whenever a subordinate makes an infraction, it will cause chaos and abuse. Hence, to follow the way of the Tao in conflict management is to find the mean, the middle path/ground. It implies either compromise that is meeting people halfway or collaboration to achieve each other's goal.

Wu Wei can also be interpreted in different ways. One is harmonizing and synthesizing opposites. Nature is filled with opposites; however, one must not view opposites as contradictories but

rather two side of the same reality. In other words, they complement each other (Reynolds 1969). In conflict management, the role of mediators and parties involved in the conflict is to discern to be able to synthesize and harmonize two conflicting opinions and decisions. This also implies compromise or collaboration.

Second, *Wu Wei* can be understood also as “non interference.” The best way for a ruler to govern is to let people be, that is, to let them live their own lives and the world will become peaceful (Reynolds 1969). This means avoidance.

Indeed, if people will superimpose themselves on others or impose too much control or discipline this will cause rebellion and resistance. This is very common in the family, many over protective, super imposing and ultra conservative parents encounter a lot of resistance and rebellion from their children. Similarly, over possessive and imposing spouses, cause marital conflicts.

Sun Zi's *Art of War* offers a comparable approach to conflict. The principle “Attack by Stratagem” suggests that to win a war is not really to wage war at all. It is to fight a war without fighting by attacking not people and cities but strategies, schemes, and plans (Giles). It is strategizing how one can prevent the enemy from initiating an attack. It is like putting up a good defense or putting oneself in a position that would discourage the enemy from attacking.

The *Art of War* says that a good general excels in planning secretly and in moving surreptitiously in order to destroy the enemy's intentions and thwart his/ her schemes or plans so that at the end of the day no blood is shed (Clavell 1983 and Griffith 1963). This implies a preventive approach rather than a curative approach to conflict. An example that can be given is that of the arms race

between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Both states strategically put up good defenses and strategies that prevented actual war between them from happening.

In modern philosophy, the father of modern political science Niccollo Machiavelli (1469-1527) is a Florentine Philosopher who is famous with his novel, *The Prince*. In this work, he proposes that for anyone to acquire and maintain power; he has to be a fierce lion and a cunning fox. One has to be feared rather than be loved but not hated. The prince or leader must be smart, pragmatic, utilitarian and efficient in ones strategy and tactics to win battles and defeat enemies. He has to be wise enough to analyze circumstances and situations that will favor or will not favor him. In order to achieve this, any means can be employed and is justified for so long as it can efficiently accomplish one's goals (Machiavelli 2007; Magee 2001; Stumpf and Fieser 2003).

In connection with conflict resolution, Machiavelli expresses competition as a strategy. One has to outsmart and overpower an opponent in any means possible to end conflict. If the enemy or the opponent is the cause of conflict, then eradicate the enemy so that there will be no conflict. This is a very radical strategy to prevent conflict.

Another modern philosopher Thomas Hobbes shares an insight on conflict management in his Social Contract Theory. It says that man is by nature evil because of his innate desires and inclinations. Without laws and an existing government or sovereign, man lives in a State of Nature. The State of Nature is characterized by war or conflict of all against all because the only basis or law of action is self interest or selfish desire. With reason, man realizes that his desire to survive is compromised

in the state of nature. Thus, man organizes an assembly through a social contract in which each one surrenders his individual interest, rights, and authority/power to a sovereign to ensure that the interest and welfare of all will be protected and promoted through laws and policies (Abel 2005; Collison and Plant, 2006; and Baird 2011). In other words, man for Hobbes has the natural tendency to get violent if unchecked, thus the human being has to subject himself to a sovereign (Leviathan) who is responsible of checking these human tendencies in order to prevent violence and war (Social Contract Theory; Hobbes's Moral and Political Philosophy; Hampton 1986; and Hobbes, T., & Curley, E. 1994).

Hobbes offers two strategies of conflict management. One is yielding to the common good or the common interest rather than to individual interest or the interest of a few. In other words, yield to that which is beneficial to the whole and not to that which is beneficial only to one or to a few. This can be achieved by yielding to the laws, rules, regulations and policies of the state, community or leader. Therefore, being obedient to the law or the authority prevents one from conflict and protects one from conflict.

The other is competing in which the sovereign has to use absolute power against those who violate and break the social contract. This further implies the need of a strong leader, state or community that will implement laws, policies, and measures to prevent violence and conflict.

The Utilitarian John Stuart Mill postulated the principle "the happiness of the greatest number". It means that to promote happiness is good and it must be pursued. Those that cause the opposite of happiness must be avoided. By happiness, he means pleasure and unhappiness the opposite of

pleasure. The moral or right action is that which tends to promote overall happiness-that which makes everybody happy or at least make the majority happy. Mill does not speak of the quantity of pleasure but rather the quality of pleasure. Reason determines which pleasure is of greater quality (Mill 2010). For example, not studying seems to be pleasurable than studying hard. But actually studying hard is more pleasurable than not studying because it has better consequences. It will make a person grow professionally and personally.

The greatest happiness principle of Mill suggests a preventive approach to conflict. It requires discernment, analysis, and reflection before one decides, chooses or acts in order to determine and promote overall happiness or the happiness of the majority.

However, in order for the majority not to abuse or exploit the minority, Mill introduced the "Harm Principle." This means that one can do whatever he wants for so long as he will not harm others. The majority can do whatever they want for so long as they do not violate the rights and welfare of the minority. In other words, the state or community can only interfere in the exercise of individual freedom if the individual violates the freedom of others or causes harm to others (Mill 1869).

The Harm Principle of Mill is also a preventive approach to conflict rather than curative. It likewise requires discernment and reflection before one acts, chooses or decides. It requires everyone to be responsible in one's action and the consequences of one's actions.

In Postmodern Philosophy, The Philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, a French philosopher, playwright and existentialist claims in his essay *Existentialism is a Humanism* that the human being when born

is without essence/nature. This means that when the human being exists he or she is devoid of definition. In other words a human being cannot be defined or determined by others because he /she has not fixed essence or nature. Essence or nature of man is made by the individual himself through the decisions and choices he/she makes every second or minute of the day. This implies that the individual can change himself any time in his lifetime as he/she chooses. This is so because the human being is free, he is freedom (Sartre and Mairret 1960; Solomon 2001; Flynn 2004; Shipka and Minton 2004; Kolak and Martin 2002).

The philosophy of Sartre on the human person, speaks that to avoid conflict one must avoid fixed and final judgments, prejudice or bias or stereotypes. One must embrace a behavior and perspective that is open, willing to accept change in others, and the hope and faith that every individual has the natural capacity to change for the better in order to reach understanding, cooperation, and collaboration.

Most conflicts are caused by assumptions, beliefs and stereotypes on other people, (Cahn and Abigail, 2007). People are very judgmental and less likely willing to let go of their biases and prejudices on others. In order to prevent conflict and resolve it, one must embrace the philosophy of Sartre. It provides an avenue to forgive and forget because people change and they can change for the better. The person one quarreled yesterday is no longer the same person one encounters today.

Though Sartre says that man is free and can choose to become what he wants himself or herself to be, this is not without consideration. Sartre says that every individual must be responsible of the consequences of one's choice (Sartre and Mairret 1960; Solomon, 2001; Flynn 2004). This means that

every individual must be careful in the exercise of freedom so that the freedom, rights and welfare of others will not be violated. This implies a preventive approach to conflict. Conflicts occur because many people are inconsiderate or do not care of the freedom, welfare of others.

John Rawls (1921-2002) an Anglo-American political and moral philosopher discussed in his work the *Theory of Justice*, the principle of "Justice as Fairness." The principle primarily says that society must assure that all citizens have a claim to equal rights and liberties. Second, it says that society must assure equal opportunities to all citizens. Finally, it says that should there be social and economic inequalities, the least advantaged must be given favor and priority (John Rawls; Pojman 2001 and Abel 2005).

The application of the principle of justice assures fairness to people that prevents conflict because conflicts occur due to the feeling of injustice or unfair treatment by others. It implies sacrifice or giving up of one's interest and desire for the sake of the least advantaged. But, prior to the giving up of one's desires and interest for the sake of the disadvantaged, it requires profound discernment.

The study did not include in its analysis all philosophers in the History of Philosophy. Likewise, in the presentation of the thoughts of all philosophers it did not include all of their teachings and works. What is emphasized are their famous teachings taken from primary and secondary sources and commentaries from scholars from which insights and implications were drawn.

5.0 Conclusion

This study shows that different philosophers actually offer varied principles and strategies in

conflict management. Some suggest yielding, others compromise, still others collaboration, competing, and avoidance. However, they share commonalities like the discernment and defense for the greater good/common good over individual interests; the discernment and defense of truth, rectitude, and justice over beliefs, feelings, opinions, prejudices, injustice and stereotypes; the principle of not harming others; a preventive approach to conflict management rather than curative. Therefore, philosophy is not an abstract endeavor but has practical value to life especially to conflict management.

6.0 Recommendation

This study recommends that another study be made using different set of philosophers from the different periods and traditions of the History of Philosophy. Also, one may look into leadership and management styles reflected in the philosophy of selected philosophers.

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