



EXISTENTIALISM AND HUMAN NATURE IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Existentialism focuses on man and human existence. Therefore, it is integral to human nature and its contributions to human nature cannot be overemphasized. The paper explores the interplay of existentialism and human nature. In doing this, the paper relates four key teachings of existentialism to human nature. These are: existence precedes essence, freedom, responsibility and authentic existence. So the paper will discuss existence precedes essence and human nature, freedom and human nature, responsibility and human nature, and authentic existence and human nature. The paper also draws four implications from the discussion, namely: i) Take decisions seriously; ii) Exercise freedom creatively; iii) Accept responsibility and iv) Live authentically. The paper concludes that existentialism is a good framework to understand human nature and should be embraced by many more Africans.

KEYWORDS: Existentialism, Human Nature, Africa, Freedom, Responsibility

INTRODUCTION

Since existentialism focuses on man and human existence, it can contribute significantly to understanding human nature in Africa. This is especially true against the background of the fact that Africans have not developed commensurate with their potentials and the enormous natural resources they are endowed with. So the paper aims to help Africans to further realize their potentials and harness their resources the more. This is a great challenge for Africa now as a continent in crisis. Essentially the paper relates four key teachings of existentialism with human nature in the African context to achieve the above stated goal. The four teachings are: i) existence precedes essence, ii) freedom, iii) responsibility and iv) authentic existence.

EXISTENTIALISM AND HUMAN NATURE

1. Existence Precedes Essence and Human Nature

Existence precedes essence is one the key teachings of existentialism through Jean-Paul Sartre. It underscores that an individual does not have a prior essence to which he/she conforms but that his/her daily decisions would eventually determine his/her essence. This implies that human nature is formed through decisions and actions, that is, a man's nature is the product of his decisions and actions in response to other people and circumstances of his/her life. Thus it can be affirmed that a human is his/her decisions. Reflecting the above emphasis, D. R. Bhandari asserts:

Existentialism is a contemporary trend in the sphere of Philosophy. It lays stress on the existence of man. Existentialism was a protest against the traditional notions of man. It purports to form a 'just' concept of man, rejecting underestimation or overestimation of Man's personality. The Chief (tenet) of existentialism is 'Existence precedes essence.' It thinks that the existence of the individual is the highest truth. To it, existence is more important than essence, for in essence, we are not able to find out the individuality.¹

Similarly, Gisele Freund notes that the concept, existence precedes essence, "signifies that humans do not have a nature that determines their modes of being and acting but that, rather, those modes are simply possibilities from which they may choose and on the basis of which they can project themselves."² In the same vein, William Barrett comments on the concept, especially with reference to man, thus: "Man exists and makes himself to be what he is; his individual essence or nature comes to be out of his existence; and in this sense it is proper to say that existence precedes essence. Man does not have a fixed essence that is handed to him ready-made; rather, he makes his own nature out of his freedom and the historical conditions in which he is placed."³ Also, Joseph Omoregbe writes on this emphasis of existentialism: "Man does not have any essence before he exists; rather, he exists first of all, then creates his own essence.... It is by his free choices and actions that man creates himself."⁴ These quotations emphasize that human nature is fluid and not fixed. Consequently, a human has to choose from possibilities to develop his/her nature and to realize him/herself.

The concept also implies that human nature goes through a long process of metamorphosis and is not static. Since a human being goes through a long period of living and deciding, his nature can continue to improve or otherwise depending on the decisions he/she makes. Quoting and explicating Sartre, Bhandari further writes,

Sartre says, 'Man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and only afterwards, defines himself.' In other words, 'man first exists then he looks at the world, thinks of it and acts in it as an individual.' His contemplation and his actions are possible only

because (of) his existence. Existence, thus, is the first principle from which all else flows. It is only later, by living, thinking and acting that man defines his nature and forms what is called his essence - that which he is and will be. Consequently, man is like a blank sheet. He never comes in the world as finished product, as readymade, as well defined, rather he defines himself in course of his life. Sartre believes that human existence is the result of chance or accident. There is no meaning or purpose of his life other than what his freedom creates, therefore, he must rely on his own resources.⁵

Thus from the existential perspective, an individual should not give up on him/herself nor should others give up on a person as long as he/she is alive, since he/she can take decisions that would improve his nature. This does not mean that there are no consequences of actions as would be discussed later under responsibility but it means that as long as one is alive, there is hope of the improvement of one's nature. Indeed, this is the significance of the emphasis on possibility in the existential philosophy and the ability to transcend oneself, perpetually projecting towards the future. In this regard, Freund affirms:

As possibility, human existence is the anticipation, the expectation, the projection of the future. The future is its fundamental temporal dimension, to which the present and the past are subordinate and secondary; existence is always stretched out toward the future. As possibility, existence is also transcendence, being beyond, because all of its constitutive possibilities organize it beyond itself toward the other beings of the world and toward the world in its totality. To transcend thus means to move toward something that is not one's own existence - i.e., toward things and toward other humans, with which the individual is related in every situation in which he finds himself.⁶

It must be pointed out, however, that there is a difference between theistic existentialists and atheistic existentialists on this score. While the former accommodate God as a factor for the improvement of human nature, that is, individuals taking intentional decisions to respond to God, the latter do not. This distinction may account for the general mood of anxiety and dread which many characterize existentialism with. With the God factor, while the challenges of life are not denied or underestimated, one can maintain a victorious, triumphalist attitude toward life. Indeed, one develops a great sense of meaning and purpose, seeing him/herself as a partner with God in the world, an instrument through whom God can do great and mighty things in time and eternity. It is significant that most of the great people of history have manifested this sense of meaning and purpose consistently. In 2 Corinthians 12:21-29, for instance, Paul recounted his experiences of dangers, deprivations, sufferings and subjection to extreme conditions. Paul's reflections show that through God's grace his nature was not conditioned by what he experienced but that he was enabled to transcend his weaknesses and limitations to become the great and mighty instrument that he was in the hands of the Lord God Almighty.

2. Freedom and Human Nature

Existentialists believe that man is condemned to be free and that freedom is integral to being human and to human existence. Accordingly, a person's nature is what he/she chooses to be. Thus, the individual is very critical in what he/she becomes. Ultimately, he cannot blame others, challenges or the environment for what he/she becomes. Under God, the individual's life is in his/her hand to become what he/she chooses. It is significant to note that the concept of choice, which is integral to freedom, is one of the most fundamental and basic concepts in the world on which hangs the destiny of individuals and even nations, through

their leaders' choices. Alasdair MacIntyre underscores the importance of choice in existentialism thus: "If any single thesis could be said to constitute the doctrine of existentialism, it would be that the possibility of choice is the central fact of human nature. Even the thesis that existence precedes essence often means no more than that men do not have fixed natures that limit or determine their choices, but rather that it is their choices that bring whatever nature they have into being."⁷ In a further explanation, MacIntyre asserts, "In Sartre the concept of choice has become a ubiquitous presence behind every human action and the being of people."⁸

Linking choice with freedom, Omoregbe observes, "Choice is inseparable from freedom, for choice is the actualization of freedom. To be free is ipso facto to be compelled to make a choice."⁹ Similarly, William L. Reese comments on Heidegger's word for human existence, Dasein, "being there," thus:

The term signals at once both the mystery and arbitrariness in one's being where and as he is. But even if one is hurled into the world, still he possesses freedom. Heidegger's philosophy centers in the uses of this freedom. One decides, for example, to live authentically or allow himself to be inauthentic. To live authentically is to discover oneself in direct relation to the thing-that-are; it is to be capable of genuine understanding and originaive thinking; it is to be capable of genuine discourse.¹⁰

In a same vein Anthony Flew affirms, "The authentic self is potentiality for action, characterized by its orientation towards the future, entailing possibilities and the constant necessity of choice."¹¹

Freedom determines human nature by the decisions and actions the individual makes over time which will shape him/her in the particular way. In essence, human nature is the outcome of one's way of deciding and acting which will be a stamp of approval around him. Freedom further shapes human nature because by constant decisions and actions, one's pattern of life is established through which one lives his/her life. Also, freedom shapes human nature because it determines to a great extent the responses others will give to the individual, which is part of what shapes an individual's nature.

3. Responsibility and Human Nature

Responsibility goes with freedom as one must take responsibility for his/her actions. W. T. Stace observes that responsibility is the link between free will and morality thus: "The connection of free will with the theory of morality is in the fact that it has usually been held by philosophers that, unless there is free will, nobody can rightly be held responsible for their actions."¹² This will make it difficult to hold people accountable for their decisions and actions, making it impossible to commend or punish for good or wrong actions respectively.¹³ Without doubt, such a condition will have serious consequences for the conduct of life and the ordering of the society. It will make life very difficult and increase chaos and disorder in the society. It is certainly contrary to the way life is lived and how the society operates.

When one takes responsibility for his/her actions, he/she has a nature that is mature, that will be able to go through life victoriously. However, if one does not accept responsibility, his/her nature would not blossom fully as he/she will be "evading" from life. This will actually make life and living very difficult for such an individual, and will also limit the individual's contributions to the world. Thus taking responsibility helps one to develop fully as a human being. Also, responsibility links one better with other individuals with whom one relates. It makes the relationship better and facilitates the contributions of others into one's life which also enhances the development of one's nature. This is because no one can fully develop his nature in isolation of others.

4. Authentic Existence and Human Nature

The idea of authentic existence is Martin Heidegger's contribution to existentialism. Heidegger's historical context emphasized the dehumanization of man, which focused on the scientific view of man as a predictable object of study. Existentialism reacted against this understanding of man. Reflecting on Heidegger's historical context, Madsen Pirienotes that in asking what it means for someone to be, "Heidegger looked at 'ways of being' and tried to examine them not by empirical philosophy but by phenomenology, the self-evident insight into the structure of experience. He thought that contemporary 'ways of being' were inauthentic, in that humans had lost the truth of their primitive world, and were absorbed in a one-sided technological culture, alienating them."¹⁴ Thus authentic life subsists in living a life of balance and overcoming the culture of alienation of the modern age. It can be argued that the culture of alienation is one of the factors for the disorientation of the modern man.

In a similar vein, Joseph W. P. Philips writes on the authentic life thus:

To be authentic is to be one's own self rather than to belong to some other – a social group, family, friend, institution or whatever. Heidegger's term for these others, *das Man*, can be translated as the 'one' or the 'they,' and it implies a condition according to which *Dasein* exists without making its own decisions, conforming instead to habits, customs and practices that determine relative cultural conditions. The authentic condition, on the contrary, implies resoluteness in assuming the ability to make one's own decision.¹⁵

Thus authenticity of life implies that one must affirm and manifest one's uniqueness, in spite of the fact that one is interrelated with other human beings. This assertion contrasts with inauthenticity which Bogdan Costa's describes thus: "If a man becomes completely absorbed or submerged into things then he loses all personality and individuality, becomes a 'nowhere man,' a 'no-one,' a 'they-self.' Such a man measures himself only with reference to peers."¹⁶ Similarly, Charles B. Guignon, affirms: "The embeddedness of our existence in a cultural context explains our inveterate tendency toward inauthenticity. As we become initiated into the practices of our community, we are inclined to drift along with the crowd, doing what 'one' does, enacting stereotyped roles, and thereby losing our ability to seize on and define our own lives."¹⁷ Living authentically is the better way to live as it enables one to live a true life and not a 'borrowed' life. Thus one becomes his/her authentic self, his/her true, real self. It is obvious that without living authentically one may not be said to be living as a true human being. In other words, living authentically enables one to develop optimally and to live maximally as it enables one to overcome barriers that impede the one who lives authentically in actualizing him/herself.

IMPLICATIONS OF EXISTENTIALISM AND HUMAN NATURE FOR AFRICA

There are implications of what has been discussed above to individuals and Africa as a continent, and these shall now be discussed.

1. Take Decisions Seriously

Decisions determine one's nature and destiny. Therefore, it is imperative that one takes his/her decisions seriously. Thus there should be a greater consciousness of their impact in making one's decisions. Similarly, there should be a greater determination to take decisions that will help one to achieve his/her purposes in life and to be of greater blessings to one's generation. This is in view of the fact that one's decisions will ultimately result in what one becomes in life and of the fact that one has a limited time to live in the world.

In view of the above, one's decisions should be based on wisdom. Wisdom helps one to make the most of life and is a good aid in taking decisions. Among others, this means

taking decisions that are reasonable and considering the implications of the decisions before they are taken. Thus one should think very critically before taking decisions. The need for wisdom in decisions cannot be overemphasized because there are usually multiple options and some of the options may look attractive but have dangerous consequences. This is one reason why adolescents and young people should seek guidance before taking major decisions since their experiences and exposure are relatively limited. There is no doubt that many who have followed the path of ruin and destruction would have saved if they had listened to good and godly counsel.

Also, decisions should be taken with the future perspective in mind. Generally, taking decisions from the consideration of the immediate does not lead to the best decisions. For instance, a lady who commits abortion may not consider the future implications of the decision. There may be complications which can lead to death. Thus she would not fulfill her purpose in life. However, considering the future perspective of decisions would help one to see the big picture, and connect the decision with the big picture. This leads to linking especially the present with the future which is critical to the actualization of one's nature.

In addition, decisions should be taken with others in view, especially those connected with the individual. Many heartaches, sorrow and suffering would be averted if people think about those connected with them in taking decisions. For instance, a married man who goes out with a lady or another woman jeopardizes his marriage. It may even lead to his death in which case he brings grief and sadness to his family. The truth is, human nature can only blossom in relation with God and other people. This understanding of human nature is in congruence with the biblical and African perspectives of the human nature.

As a people, Africans should take decisions that will help them to harness their enormous resources more effectively, and make the continent to occupy her rightful position in the world. More than she has done, Africa should be a partner and contributor to world affairs. Among others, the colossal waste of human and natural resources in the continent should stop. Also, there should be greater emphasis on growth and maintenance; the menace of corruption should be addressed, as well as poverty and the debt burden.

2. Exercise Freedom Creatively

Man is condemned to be free. Thus a lot depends on one's exercise of freedom. Exercising freedom creatively is to use one's freedom to promote a better individual, to contribute to the growth of others and to ultimately create a better world. This is in line with Kant's maxim of the categorical imperative of duty, namely, that one should act in such a way that his/her action can be universalized. It is also in line with the Africa understanding of life whereby one consciously recognizes that he has a responsibility for others.

The abuse or misuse of freedom by many is one of the reasons for the dismal state of Africa today. Today, Africa is bedeviled with crises, low life expectancy, poverty and disease, among others. In a sense, most of these manifestations can be traced to misuse of freedom in view of the fact that God has endowed Africa with more than enough resources to overcome many of the challenges confronting her. While the nexus between the abuse or misuse of freedom and the dismal state of Africa is true in most areas of life, it is most pronounced in leadership. Many in leadership use their positions to enrich themselves at the expense of the people they are elected to serve, impoverish their people, even oppress them and literally destroy their nations.

In addition, Africa must allow for a greater manifestation of freedom of her citizens. There are flagrant abuses of freedom in many African countries. Governments should refrain

from gagging citizens of their countries but rather create a more conducive atmosphere for citizens to exercise their fundamental human rights and their freedom. This is a way forward for Africa as the continent with a very high human right abuse record. Allied with the issue of freedom is justice. Again there are great expressions of injustice in Africa. In Nigeria, for instance, there is the case of Niger Delta. The crude oil that sustains the nation's economy is mined from the area, but the area is devastated and there is striking poverty in many communities. Thus, greater consciousness should be demonstrated in addressing injustice so that a greater number of Africans would realize themselves and their potentials as human beings.

3. Accept Responsibility

One major problem in life is refusal to accept responsibility and sadly, millions of people are plagued with the problem. Accepting responsibility is a sign of maturity. It helps to reduce one's errors and thus facilitates one's development and process of actualization. That is why it is very critical for the development of human nature. Also, accepting responsibility promotes good relationship with others, especially significant others whose lives are integrally related with the individual. Thus accepting responsibility influences one's intimate relationships and shapes one's life and nature. That is why no one can fully develop alone without interactions with other people along life's pilgrimage.

Related to the concept of maturity, accepting responsibility also promotes a life of balance, a life of integrity as it may help one to overcome guilt. Allied with this fact, it prevents the inhibition of the power of the subconscious mind which thus makes one a flourishing, blossoming individual who has zest and enthusiasm in life. Accordingly, one's contributions in life would increase and one's impact on his/her generation. This leads to a greater manifestation of one's nature. In other words, the more one contributes to other people, the fuller one's life becomes and the greater one realizes his/her nature in the world.

To improve the quality of life in Africa, individually and corporately, Africans and African leaders must accept responsibility for their actions. The penchant to look for scapegoats or blame others for our problems must stop. We must accept responsibility for our problems and map out realistic strategies to address them. While we may receive help from foreign countries, we should not expect them to solve our problem for us.

4. Live Authentically

Many people are not living authentic lives. Metaphorically, they are living borrowed lives or duplicated lives. They are consumed by the desire to please others that it bothers on obsession. Thus some end up becoming schizophrenic personalities. They are torn personalities, split between who they really are or want to be and what people want them to be. With such attitude, life generally becomes a burden for such people. Consequently, they are robbed of zest and enthusiasm and their potentials are far underutilized and their contributions to the world far limited than it should be. At the extreme manifestation, the attitude can lead to lack of interest in life which is a factor for attempted suicide.

On the other hand, living authentically enhances the greater utilization of one's potentials, deepens one's personality and facilitates one's success and contributions to the world. Thus one becomes a great source of inspiration. This is so because living authentically increases one's consciousness of a sense of purpose and destiny which is one of the greatest factors for living a meaningful and fulfilled life.

In another dimension, living authentically will help to redirect the negative, destructive forces into positive directions. Such individuals would thus be redeemed from

destructive behaviors and actions. As a result, there would be reduction in such social evils as rape, drug addiction, prostitution, armed robbery, and so on. This would result as many who commit these social vices have low estimation of themselves and/or operate based on the mold others have cast them. Reduction in social vices would create a conducive atmosphere for many more people to make positive contributions to the society. This in turn would promote a better society as well as growth and development of the nation.

Therefore, Africans should live more authentically in order that their individual human nature would be more fulfilled. Africans need to be set free from the excessive influence of others on the individual. There is need for a good balance between the emphasis on the community which is integral to African philosophy and the necessity to set the individual on the course to realize him/herself. This balance is not a call for excessive individualism of the West with its adverse effects on the community. In this respect, greater efforts should be made to dismantle cultural structures that have held millions in bondage to subhuman treatment and actions, for example, inhuman widow treatment, child marriage, conversion murder and anachronistic, subjugating, acquisitive ideologies. These have brought untold hardship, great suffering and death to millions in Africa and destruction of properties, which have impacted negatively on the quality of life and made living burdensome in Africa.

CONCLUSION

The paper has related key existential teaching with human nature in the African context. Thus, it provides a bridge from what Africa is to what Africa can become - a continent utilizing her potentials and harnessing her resources more effectively to improve life expectancy, create a more conducive environment, promote sustainable development, reduce colossal waste of humans and properties, enhance prosperity and attract investors, and arrest infrastructural decay in the continent. These in turn would increase Africa's contributions to the world and improve her rating in the world. Conclusively, it can be affirmed that existentialism is a good framework to understand human nature and should be embraced by many more Africans.

ENDNOTES

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