



Sartre's Existentialism, Freedom and the Development of Human Existence in Africa

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ABSTRACT: Life is becoming increasingly a burden in Africa. There is a growing sense of hopelessness in the continent. Life expectancy is comparatively lower than that of other continents. Many countries in the continent are facing one crisis or the other resulting in the colossal loss of life and properties. Consequently, there are discussions on reversing the unenviable trend in Africa and ensuring a better future for Africa. This paper shares the concern and its thrust is improving human existence in Africa. Sartre's existentialism and freedom are seen as factors to effect the link between the dismal present and a possible better future of the continent.

I. Introduction

Life is becoming increasingly burdensome in Africa. A growing number of African youth do not see any future for themselves and are desperate to leave the continent. The rate of suicide has increased in recent times. There is an increasing sense of hopelessness and meaninglessness in Africa. Against this backdrop the subject of human existence in Africa is receiving more attention. This paper is an effort in this direction. The authors discuss Sartre's existentialism and freedom and draw implications therefrom for improving human existence in Africa. The paper examines Sartre's existentialism and freedom, discusses the challenges of human existence in Africa before drawing some implications.

II. Sartre's Existentialism and Freedom

Jean-Paul Charles Aymard Sartre was a French philosopher and a leading proponent of French atheistic existentialism. As a prominent part of classical theorists in existentialism, he like others also reflected on human life. He is concerned with the issue of human predicament and his philosophy laid the foundation for that doctrine. Philosophy to him must have direct relationship with practical demands of living.¹ His theories of existentialism and freedom have cemented his place among the most influential Western philosophers of the twentieth century and beyond. To him, individual freedom has a direct relationship with qualitative human existence. His freedom cannot be divorced from his philosophy of human existence.

His *dictum* 'existence precedes essence' and atheism are the foundation of his existentialism. By this *dictum*, he means man first exists, and then defines himself. Man cannot be said to be anything before and outside his existence. This implies that man is not a predetermined being. There is no destiny outside him that determines what an individual would be. He cannot be seen from a fatalistic point of view. He is what he makes himself. No one is born with innate personality but everyone comes to become who they are by the goals they pursue and values they adopt.

Sartre's atheism also gives credence to his notion of 'existence precedes essence.' His philosophy is in fact an attempt to form a coherent atheism. If there is no God, it means there is no design for humankind. He

opines that "if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being whose existence comes before its essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept of it."² The absence of God gives man the latitude to completely take hold of his destiny.

He strongly opines that the non-existence of God does not have any negative effect on human values. Without God, man can attain progress, success, honesty, dignity, and qualitative existence.³ What is needed, according to Sartre, is for man to rediscover himself and to comprehend that nothing can save him from himself, not even the valid proof of the existence of God. It then implies that man can choose and determine his essence since there is no absolute being to do that for him.

Sartre's *dictum* and atheism provide a practical ground for him to conclude that man is free. First, if man is not predetermined and he is nothing until he becomes what he makes himself, he is then free to determine his destiny, present, future, character, goals and so many more. Since no essence can be attributed to man prior to existence, and there is no human nature that exists outside or inside being, man is free limitlessly. Sartre writes in *Being and Nothingness* that "No limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself or if you prefer, that we are not free to cease being free."⁴

Second, the absence of God makes man to be limitlessly free to take hold of his destiny. The non-existence of God makes everything permissible. Since God does not exist, man becomes the only being that is limitlessly free and whose existence comes before his essence. Man without God is free to become whatever he wishes to become. What then is the scope of Sartre's freedom?

In his concept of liberty, Isaiah Berlin makes a distinction between two types of freedom; positive and negative freedom. Negative freedom is "the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints...; positive liberty is the possibility of acting... in such a way as to take control of one's life...."⁵ Germane to negative freedom is non-interference and to positive liberty is the ability of the individual to be his own master. Sartre's concept of freedom is the combination of Berlin's two types of freedom. Nothing must interfere with individual's freedom and the individual must take that advantage to achieve personal goals and also transcend self.

To Sartre, freedom is fundamental and foundational to the being of man. Man came to the world to be free. Freedom is the nature of man and it cannot be in excess. He avers that "freedom in its foundation coincides with the nothingness which is the heart of man."⁶ Man cannot be said to be a being or human if he is not free. Freedom to him is tantamount to existence. Roquentin, the protagonist in *Nausea*, posits that freedom is the same thing as existence. "I am free, I haven't a single reason for living left.... I am going to outlive myself."⁷ Roquentin accepts that he is limitlessly free and decides to live in the virtue of his freedom. To outlive himself, he is seeking to become what he is not by reaching outside of himself. Hence, he will always assert his freedom.

Freedom is natural to the being of man. Copleston in his commentary of Sartre's concept of freedom opines that "the fact is that man cannot help being free and he cannot help acting in the world. Even if he chooses to commit suicide, he chooses so and acts. And these acts are performed with motives."⁸ The above quotation has a few implications apart from freedom being fundamental to the nature of man. First, anything is permissible in man's use of his freedom since he can choose to commit suicide. Second, man's freedom must be translated into action. Sartre's existentialism is a theory of action. Third, individual freedom should be propelled by a motive. Therefore, irrational, thoughtless and reckless use of freedom is not permitted. A significant motive can, however, make an individual to commit suicide. Essentially, deliberate intention, choice and action cannot be divorced from freedom.

In addition, the freedom of man is unrestricted and there is no universal moral law that determines how he should act. No human law must restrict the freedom of the individual. No human law should determine individual character. Characters are also not determined by either genetic traits or experience of formative years or social and environmental indoctrinations. They are essentially determined by the projects the individual has freely chosen to pursue. The implication is that Sartre's ethics and existentialism is individual centered and not communal.

Since God has been eliminated in his philosophy, someone has to invent values. To invent values means life has no meaning *a priori*; life is meaningless until it is lived. It is men that give life meaning and value

is nothing more than the meaning that we give.⁹ The freedom of man is to create his own morality but since we exist in the presence of others our morality must also take others into consideration. This thesis is, however, self-defeating and contradictory. He has through his argument slipped into Kant's categorical imperative which is the law of autonomous will.¹⁰ Also, his argument for individual morality is the beginning of the failure of his thesis. There will be clashes of morality if we all choose our own morality. Another serious concern is how and who is to adjudicate in the wake of conflict since everyone has his own morality.

However, Sartre is not just interested in man being free for the sake of freedom. The individual must break free of self-fastened shackles in order to attain his unlimited potentials. Freedom is, therefore, meaningless if it cannot assist man to become the best that he can be.

Man has potentiality to become what he is not. He is perpetually beyond himself since he is fluid and indeterminate. He must, therefore, lose himself beyond himself. Hence, Sartre says man is transcendent. It must, however, be observed that life is not as straight forward as Sartre thought it to be. In concrete terms, there are obvious challenges to the realization of a man's life's goals. There are limitations that life itself imposes on man which limit how far he can go. These include sickness, disappointment, and incapacitation. The opportunities provided by each society also determine how far the individual can go in the realization of life goals.

But how is it possible for society to continue and community be maintained despite Sartre's emphasis on individual limitless freedom? He answered this in *Existentialism is a Humanism*. "In willing freedom, we discover that it depends entirely upon the freedom of others. I cannot make liberty my aim unless I make that of others equally my aim."¹¹ Hence his concept accommodates the freedom of others and responsibility in the use of freedom. Man must always make a choice he will be responsible for when he exercises his freedom to choose and he must choose also on behalf of others. This is also reiterated in his concept of *Anguish* which is the burden of freedom, and a reflective apprehension of the self as a free agent. It is the burden of ensuring that one uses his freedom in a responsible and not reckless manner. The recognition of others must, however, not be an impediment to individual's freedom and desire to achieve personal life projects. The individual is, therefore, more important than the society.

Another very important concept in the discourse of Sartre's freedom is choice. Choice and freedom are Siamese twins in the work of most existentialists, and Sartre is not an exception. The usage of choice in Sartre's existentialism does not mean a spontaneous reaction to issue but that the individual has a reflective control of the deeper aspects of himself and in turn determine how things will look to him, how he will feel in response to things and the relative importance each consideration will have for him when he deliberates about what to do.

The ultimate purpose of all we have discussed is for the individual to attain authentic existence. Authentic existence, though Martin Heidegger's philosophical classification of human beings in the world, agrees with Sartre's concept of self-realization and individual's transcendence. Sartre uses it to describe individuals that are not conformist, who have taken control of their destinies and have accepted the need to apply their limitless freedom in pursuit of alternative ways of life that can make life meaningful and existence qualitative. Individuals that have exhausted all the phenomenal aspects of their being and have transcended themselves. Essentially, authentic existence has implications for freedom, choice, potentiality, action and possibilities. The opposite of it is bad faith. That is when the individual refuses to activate his freedom, take hold of his destiny and exhaust all his phenomenal aspects. The individual must not limit himself to one option as there are many alternatives that can be considered. For example, a man must not say he can only be a professor in life. He must consider other alternatives

III. Human Existence in Africa

The scope of this part of the paper is an examination of African existentialism. Undoubtedly, Africa, like its western counterpart, has its unique philosophy of human existence though the larger part of what we have as existentialism today is Western existentialism. There is need, therefore, to discuss key issues in African existentialism. It is also important to point it out that African notion of human existence cannot be separated

from African worldview. This is because the worldview of the people of Africa includes their perception of the world which includes human existence. In fact, human existence is an essential part of African worldview. This is also because social, cultural factors cannot be separated from human existence. This is corroborated by Otijele when he avers that "culture is a model for understanding existence, a conceptualization inclusive of all dimensions of the universe itself, one that integrates every aspect of life into an ineligious whole."¹² A few issues in African concept of human existence will now be discussed.

The beginning point of any discussion about human existence in Africa is the origin of man. Unlike the Western existentialism that pays no attention to man's origin, it is an important part of African existentialism. In Africa, man is a product of something and did not just drop from somewhere. The pre-existence of man has direct relationship with his practical existence. This African perspective can also not be separated from their belief in God. God, to many African people, is supreme, stable, reliable and dependable and the creator of man and the universe. He is the creator and the sustainer of the universe and everything therein including humanity.

Man to Africans is brought to the world by God. His existence in the world cannot be separated from his creator. In African worldview, nothing (human existence inclusive) happens without the spiritual dimension. It is believed that every aspect of life is controlled by a particular spirit. This is because of the people's belief that the Supreme Being acts through a host of lesser gods even in the creation of man.

Apart from the Supreme Being, the divinities are also important in the pre-existence of man. The divinities or gods are like intermediaries between God and man and they are venerated.¹³ There are different versions of African legends of human creation. For example, the Yoruba legend gives *Obatala* also known as *Orunmila* the responsibility of moulding the human body (*Ara*) from sand.¹⁴ The moulded body is still lifeless as *Obatala* does not have the responsibility and power to give life to be body. This is the prerogative of the Supreme Being Himself, *Olodumare*.¹⁵

Before coming to the world, the individual will have to choose an *Ori* (essence) from among a large number of *Ori* stored in *Ajala's* warehouse.¹⁶ The individual getting to the world is oblivious of the type of essence he has chosen. So, there is agreement among scholars that man's essence is chosen before his existence. Scholars are, however, not united in whether the implication of the choice of *Ori* is hard or soft deterministic but one of these writers argued elsewhere that the concept of *Ori* in Yoruba ontology is soft deterministic.

The involvement of God in human existence contradicts Sartre's atheistic philosophy. The story of human pre-existence in African ontology also contradicts Sartre's position that man has no essence before his actual existence. Man's essence in a way is predetermined in Africa worldview. It is held in many African communities that spiritual forces can determine and even alter individual essence.

The society is another important part of African worldview of human existence. Qualitative and functional human existence is not entirely dependent on the individual. The value that the African ontology places on the society is beyond mere recognition of others as found in Sartre's philosophy and some other key existentialists. Without missing word, the Africans believe no good individual existence is possible without the society. The overstretched individuality of Western existentialism is not in line with the African view of human existence.

The fact that the individual is limitlessly free in the existentialism of Sartre suggests that the larger society has little or no part in what the individual becomes. Though the society is recognized in his philosophy, the society must, however, stay clear of the individual and not assert any form of pressure (positive or negative) on him. The society must not tamper with the freedom of the individual to transcend himself. Sartre, though, opines that the individual must make his decisions with the consciousness of choosing on behalf of others in the society, but this will not always be so since the individual cannot be checked in whatever way he makes his decisions. This seeming contradiction in Sartre's view of the individual justifies a consideration of the value that the Africans place on the society in the attainment of qualitative human existence even for the individual.

The term that best describe the value of the society in African worldview of human existence is *Ubuntu* from the South and East Africa. This concept shows how the being of an African person is not only imbedded in the community, but in the universe as a whole. *Ubuntu* is used in a more philosophical sense to mean the belief in a universal bond of sharing, that which connects all humanity. With *Ubuntu*, a member of a family or a village who is in great existential difficulty will not be left alone. *Ubuntu* speaks about the interconnectedness of humanity and the fact that no man can exist in isolation.¹⁷

Ubuntu received global recognition at the Nelson Mandela's memorial service where the then president of America, Barack Obama, spoke about its existential importance: "There is a word in South Africa – *Ubuntu* – a word that captures Mandela's greatest gift, his recognition that we are bound together in ways that are invisible to the eye, that there is a oneness in humanity, that we achieve ourselves by sharing ourselves with others and caring for those around us."¹⁸ The above justifies the existential importance of human interconnectedness and that no essential self or authentic existence is possible without others. Obama's statement suggests that there are virtues of *Ubuntu* that are germane to good human existence. To jettison this global interconnectedness is dangerous for world peace. In addition, our individual goals and aspirations are better achieved when we cooperate with others. *Ubuntu* characteristically demands that high value be placed on human life, we reject vengeance, place high premium on dignity, compassion and humanness it also dictates a shift from confrontation to mediation, dictates good character, and favours restorative justice.

It is, however important to strike a balance between Sartre's individuality and African communal life. This is because excessive individualism and an overstretched communalism is problematic to the progress of any society. The individual is not an atomic and self-sufficient being that does not need others to realize his goals. It is the community that makes available what is necessary for the realization of individual potentials and for living a worthy life. It is however counterproductive for the community argument to be pushed to the extent of it being an obstacle to the ability of the individual to be innovative, initiate a new course of action and be autonomous.

The way forward according to Ebijuwu is to see the relationship between the individual and the community as complementary. It is possible for the individual to be connected with the society, contribute his quota to the common good and still maintain his identity. The ideal society is the one that respects individual aspiration and at the same time encourages the individual to see the common good as a fundamental goal of everyone.¹⁹

Morality is another essential issue in the development of African philosophy of human existence. Morality is deeper in African discourse of human existence than in Sartre's existentialism. It is the foundation of good human existence since it regulates the social relations among people. Adherence to moral rules provides answers to complex questions of human existence. It is in fact the essence of being. Real and good human existence is discussed in Africa in relation to sound and godly moral standard. An immoral individual cannot be perceived as existing in many African societies.

Sound and excellent morality is a condition for being human in Africa. Sound morality has also helped to shape and re-shape the lives of many individuals for their attainment of self-realization. It is the belief of many African societies that individual success is difficult without discipline which is a product of morality. Even if an individual gets successful in an immoral way, the same immorality will crumble the success. Morality in Africa is, therefore, important for individual attainment of self-realization and the preservation of the society. Morality in Africa has both ethical and ontological interpretation.

The ethical interpretation describes the characteristics of a morally sound individual as one who is self-disciplined; well nurtured, responsible, has integrity, possesses good knowledge and wisdom, a paragon of excellent character and virtuous in nature. Hence morality is a concept needed for individual happiness and good human condition. This is in agreement with Aristotle that virtues are qualities that are necessary for the development of man as a social being.²⁰

The ontological interpretation of morality, on the other hand, is that it is the essence of being. Being cannot be explained independently in many African cultures without morality. Good morality distinguishes between human being in a generic sense and human person in a specific sense.³⁶ However, it is the society and

not the individual that determines moral standard in many African countries. The spiritual dimension is also important in the determination of right and wrong. The foundation of philosophy of existence of many African societies is, therefore predicated on sound moral standing of individual members of the society. This is why punishment for sin and wrong doing is also a significant part of African moral system.

African morality is, therefore, a veritable basis for engendering normative principles for addressing problems and challenges in societies. The search for a functional socio-political order in the contemporary African world can be achieved by it. Human society needs a synergy of morality and socio-political ideals to achieve better human existence. This is because desirable socio order is predicated on moral order while sustainable development is also not possible without socio order. It is the strong belief of these writers that many social crises that are being witnessed in many African countries will be drastically reduced if African morality can be institutionalized.

It is important at this point to juxtapose the various aspects of African philosophy of existence that have been discussed with the concept of individual freedom. We may start by asking: does these essential aspects of African philosophy of existence (human pre-existence, religious factor, society and morality) impede individual freedom? Is the individual free to transcend self, fulfil potential and realize self-ambition under African philosophy of existence? The answer is in the affirmative though a face value interpretation may suggest otherwise.

None of the essential parts of African philosophy of existence impedes individual freedom in practical terms though some extant interpretations have argued in that direction. Such conclusion is obviously a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of thorny issues surrounding the African conception of person. Beginning with religion, most religions in Africa permit and encourages individuals to take spiritual actions in making life worthwhile. This is the freedom to worship and offer sacrifice to gods either to better a good destiny or change a bad destiny to good. The emphasis many African communities places on good virtues and sound moral in private and public life is a testimonial that African culture supports freedom of the individual to take actions that will positively affect their existence. This is the freedom of the individual to nurture his or her character. There are many more illustrations that can be used in this regard. Like Sartre, African philosophy of human existence is also a theory of action. The freedom of the individual to take positive actions in the process of making existence a worthwhile experience. However, there are areas like gender discrimination that impede the freedom of the female folks to transcend self that many African cultures must change.

IV. Implications of Sartre's Existential Freedom for Human Existence in Africa

The discussion of Sartre's existentialism and freedom and African existentialism shows that there are convergence and divergence. Notwithstanding, Sartre's philosophy has some implications for human existence in Africa.

1. Emphasis on Action

We should not resign to fate. Even when we pray for God's intervention, the truth is that the Divine-Human imperative is categorical for us to act. There is need for greater emphasis on action in human existence in Africa. Many more individual Africans must take practical steps to liberate themselves from the shackles that inhibit them and/or to transcend their limitations. From politics to religion, there is too much docility on the part of Africans which allow leaders to get away with their excesses and wickedness. More than ever before, we need to hold our leaders accountable and challenge them for their recklessness, insensitivity and inhumanity. The tendency for the individual to be subsumed in the group should be challenged when necessary so that human existence in Africa can be enhanced.

2. Critical Evaluation of Motives

There is also the need for critical evaluation of motives from individual Africans and of others. Wicked and devilish motives which are spreading across the society should be eschewed. These include using others as means to an end, using people as baits to collect ransom, killing humans for ritual, bringing sorrow and affliction on others through cybercrime, armed robbery, rape and child trafficking. Instead of these, motives such as promoting others, developing the economy, liberating people, exercising good governance, and

creating a more conducive atmosphere, should be promoted across board. Political desperation that manifests in vote buying, threat and violence to truncate the political process should be jettisoned for the continent to move forward.

3. Development of Potentials

Individuals must accept the challenge to develop their potentials to be better individuals and make greater contributions for the common good. Also, leaders should be committed to creating an enabling environment where individuals can develop their potentials. This is why the problem of insecurity in Nigeria, for example, is a major cause of concern. It leads to destruction and wastage of potentials for many people. Also, the quality of education and health needs to be improved as contributory factors to developing people's potentials in the nation.

4. The Power of Choice

The critical issue of choice is imperative to enhance human existence in Africa. While most Africans may dispute Sartre's dictum of existence precedes essence, it is a categorical fact that the individual becomes what he/she chooses ultimately, both spiritually and physically. By extension, the society also becomes what it chooses. There is a great concern about the moral values in the society especially by the youth. This is a reflection of the bad choices many more youth are making, without strong checks by some adults. To reserve the dangerous trend, there is need for embracing positive choices that would bring about changes in the continent.

5. The Challenge to Accept Responsibility

With choice goes responsibility. On individual and corporate levels, Africans need to accept the challenge of responsibility, from the family, to the church and society. Africans need to ponder more on the consequences of their actions and take responsibility for their decisions. This is a major way forward in overcoming the challenges with which we are faced. We must be intentional in retracing our feet from the paths of failure and destruction, check the growing tide of wickedness in the society and work on a more conducive environment for good governance. Those involved in the problem of insecurity should be punished accordingly to serve as deterrent to others. The long process of dispensing justice should be hastened.

6. Empowering Africans to Exercise Freedom

Africa needs to empower more of her citizens to know and exercise freedom. In this regard, the rate of illiteracy in the continent should be reduced drastically. Also, leaders should check the high rate of human right abuses observable in some parts of the continent. In addition, governments must show greater concern for the plight of citizens of their respective counties. More conscious efforts should be made to address the problem of the low value we place on human life, which is a causative factor for many of the abuses of freedom. As individuals, Africans should also make more concerted efforts to assert their rights, liberate themselves from the shackles of oppression, and take practical steps that would help them to live authentic life on a wider scale.

V. Conclusion

The paper has examined Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism and freedom and freedom and the development of existence in Africa. It discussed Sartre's existentialism and freedom, it also examined Africa's existentialism and drew implications of Sartre's existentialism and freedom for improving the human situation in Africa. There is need to address human situation. Challenges in Africa. The ideas of this paper will facilitate the meeting of the critical need. This would create a more conducive environment for peace and progress in Africa, and actualize the great potentials of Africa.

VI. ENDNOTES

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