

The Black Man's burden and the existentialist challenge: unchaining the African consciousness to action

Tom Eneji Ogar*, Emmanuel Kelechi Iwuagwu

Department of Philosophy, University of Calabar, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria

*e-mail: enejioagar93@gmail.com

Abstract

This research work, "The Black Man's Burden and the Existentialist Challenge: Unchaining the African consciousness to action," is a critical analysis of the human condition in Africa that has remained intractable right from political independence to the present and the right approach to stem the tide towards the Africa of the future. How is it that none of the about forty-eight nations South of the Sahara have made appreciable and sustained progress since most achieved independence in the 1960s, except maybe a few with exceptional natural resources. It has been found out that what has become known as the Black Man's burden is a consequence of unacceptable poverty rate, endemic corruption, civil strife, wars, terrorism, banditry, and a generally low level of human growth and development. The idea that Western countries of Europe and America hold the key to Africa's development is a myth that is not worth patronizing. The answer to the Black Man's burden lies as they should in the hands of African countries themselves and especially the individuals and their governments. It is not the case that Africa has been the only continent in history that has suffered this human condition. Europe in the aftermath of the world wars was in shambles, and it took some conscious efforts of individuals and governments to consciously revolt against the absurd through a commitment to come out of the vicious cycle of finger-pointing as causes. The Black Man's burden can also be addressed using the existentialist movement as a theoretical framework to bring Africa out of the present malaise of backwardness. An acceptance of the absurd and a conscious revolt against the same is what we need in Africa to address this sisyphusian like scenario.

Keywords:

Africa, existentialist, consciousness.

1 INTRODUCTION

Many attempts at explaining the Human Condition in all the characteristics and key events that compose the essentials of human existence, including birth, growth, emotion, aspiration, conflicts, and morality, have appeared in various shades of conclusions. We are all born into a set of circumstances, not of our desires. We are "thrown" into the world, which we experience as having this quality of "thrownness". I find myself pitched into it, and within it, I have to try to make meaning of my life and sort out my possibilities. To a large degree, humans are aware of the passage of time, can and do remember the past and imagine the future, and are ultimately aware of their mortality. Only human beings are known to ask themselves questions relating to the purpose of life beyond the base need for survival. What is the meaning of existence? Why was I born? Why am I here? Where will I go when I die? The human struggle to find answers to these questions and the very fact that we can conceive them and ask them defines the human conditions. The world as revealed by science is, to a large extent objective, physical laws condition it.

On the other hand, the world in which the human person finds himself is more than that. Humans are more like a spider spinning within a web of meanings. How can one know what to do, what to choose, and what direction to take without meaning and direction? Suffice it to say that not everything is open to us as much will depend on our background. But we have the freedom to choose which of the possibilities we would wish to take. Since science cannot provide a ready-made sense of meaning, significance, and value, we have to set about constructing it for ourselves. From different epochs and periods in philosophical reflections the world over, the problem of the human condition has plagued humanity, and different approaches have been drawn to address the condition. Of particular interest in this work is the existentialist approach. Existence to some existentialist thinkers is Absurd. For Jean-Paul Sartre, the absurd was shaped by his experience during the 2nd world war. The German occupation of France drove home to Sartre the fact that evil is not a mere abstraction but real and concrete. For Albert Camus, the relationship between the world and human beings is absurd.

Therefore, it is the discord, friction, and "bad fit" between human beings and the world that brings about the Absurd. Consider one's desires, hopes, and aspirations. Camus believes that the world wears people out, and hence life is not fair. Most often than not, our youthful hopes and grand ideals get diminished into thin air by the constant discord that exists between us and the world. In the face of absurdity, there is a need for a conscious revolt and a reflection of a given human nature in which with no support from any external help is condemned to invent himself. Although the African continent is not at the moment faced with any major world challenge as the 1st and 2nd world wars, the challenge of internal wars, conflicts, poverty, terrorism, banditry, and other social ills facing the continent today can be likened to the major upheavals of the world wars with their implications. This work, therefore, argues that as the existentialist movement flourished after the 2nd world war and embraced the absurd, Africa can equally imbibe the existentialist culture to addressing the continent's challenges. Since most of the pressing issues today are existential, the most auspicious time to take the challenge is now.

2 THE AFRICAN BURDEN

The method consists of design, procedure, and data analysis. From whatever dimensions of indicators, Africa has remained in a deep crisis. It is a fact that the problem and crisis of politics, economy and society are deepening. But

beneath these issues are strands of integrity, struggle, hope, and commitment to change for the better. One of the basic problems of statecraft in Africa has been the inability to generate and implement viable and effective policies for growth and development.

It is a worry that there is no known area in overall growth where any African state could be logically said to have been so successful that such an example and framework should stand as a lesson to the world except in cases of a few human personal distinctions. To a large extent, beyond the usual rhetoric and radio and television propaganda, most African policy directions have ignored starring realities while putting manipulative mechanisms in place to squander scarce resources on white elephant projects with no direct benefit to the people. According to Igabafen, "failed policies have developed the pockets and bank accounts of a tiny class of political elites and their hangers-on (16). This is against the interest of a majority of the populace who suffer from grinding poverty and hopelessness. The outcome of the above scenario is evident in insecurity, terrorism, banditry instability, and violence in most African states.

That this should be so cannot surprise the historian, for the history of Africa's self-development, before foreign rule began, had shown that these people achieved much in the past and will in all likelihood dedicate such great again. However, Africa's actual and present condition is one of deep trouble, perhaps a deeper crisis than the worst imposed during the colonial era. For some time now, deserts encroachment has widened. Broad savannahs and host communities have lost all means of human existence and, in some instances, are gravely threatened. Tropical forests, such as the world will never see again, have continued to feed the export market. Cities that are barely deserving in the name have spawned poverty plagues on a scale never known in earlier times. Harsh governments or dictators' rule over peoples who distrust them to the point of hatred, and usually for good and sufficient reason, and all too often one dismal tyranny gives way to a worse one" (Davidson 2015, p. 9). Despair rots civil society. The state is seen to become an enemy where bandits and terrorists thrive and flourish. In the face of all of this, the industrialized world has continued to take its cut of Africa's dwindling fortune within the transfer of huge wealth to the countries of Europe and America to the detriment of Africa and its people (Andrew 2014; Andrew 2015).

What then explains this negative trend and degradation from the hopes and freedom of these countries that have just regained independence? How has this come about and where did the liberators go wrong? Human blunders and corruption can simply supply some quick answers and have their abrasive part in the narrative. The fact remains that human failures have always been part of us and can seldom reveal the crux of the matter.

The crisis of society in Africa can be seen to derive from many conflicts and upsets, yet the root of the matter is quite different from the above and more difficult to analyze. Africa does have the material and mineral resources to solve its own problem. It is on record that it is a continent that is so richly blessed and endowed with all kinds of different high-value assets, including oil, gold, diamond, platinum, forests, and good weather. It has the largest percentage of the world's natural resources. However, it is a sad contradiction that though African states have political independence, they hardly have control of the riches that the continent possesses.

This has been largely attributed to the fact that Africans do not appreciate what they have. On another level, the Black Man is physically strong and attractive among the strongest if not the strongest in the world. The outstanding performances of black people in world sports meetings are evidence of the physical prowess of the black race. However, a Black Man led by his African leader has failed to demonstrate any willingness to apply his brain to his advantage concerning ending misery and want in Africa systematically and coherently. An argument with a strong case has it that African countries work collectively for self-destruction guided by the knack for the short term. The passion for the blacks seems to be their avarice to build individual wealth, as fast as that is possible while there is still available chance or before their successors take it over. The end result, according to Stevens (2011) is that:

Poverty is more of a norm than an exception in Africa. Africa is the world's poorest inhabited continent. It is on average poorer than it was 25 years ago. Of the 175 countries reviewed by the United Nation Development Program report, 2003, 25 African nations ranked the lowest 315 million people (one out of 2 in sub-Saharan Africa) survive on less than one American dollar per day. A third (33%) of the African population suffers from malnutrition (p. 48).

The case is endless as even less than 50% of the African population has access to good and affordable health care facilities, not to talk of the about 500 million Africans without access to safe water (Mostert *et al.*, 2015). It is a continent that is infested with conflicts within national and territorial boundaries. A careful reflection of the situation has remained bleak as even life expectancy is below 40 years old.

By the late 19th century, as history will indicate, most of Africa had been under colonial rule (Morin-Rivat *et al.*, 2015). During and before this period, Africa's resources and people were exploited, with scores of thousands of slaves being removed without their consent each year to the Americas and Europe. Africans have been at the receiving end of oppressive policies of the colonial masters and their surrogates, some of whom took over after independence. As a long tradition of exploitation and misrule, the past 50 years in Africa have demonstrated a lack of effective and efficient strategies for dealing with problems ingrained over decades of oppression (Good 1991). Some scholars have argued that analyzing the issues clearly and how to handle each one is perhaps one of the biggest challenges facing Africa. There is a lack of political consensus concerning how the challenges can be overcome collectively, mostly because marking as a bigger African team would result in territorialism as far as power and access to resources are concerned.

An important question is not whether oppression left the continent at a disadvantage but whether situations could have been different after the end of oppression. However, it is sad to note that oppression has continued even after democratization by the new nationalist leaders who have introduced draconian and iron-fisted rule. The evident yokes of corruption, dictatorship, cronyism, and ethnicity manifest a strong grip on Africa. Oppression by black leaders is the same oppression as that by the colonial overlords. It is a contradiction to regard Africans in their current state of economic and

mental freedom as free in absolute terms. Freedom must be seen to be something more than being a mere proxy for the overthrow of white rule.

Today, Africa and the Black Man still subjected to a quantum of evils and different glee of oppression in his daily life is a testimony to the many years of existence without hope and purposeful leadership. A time may have come for leadership to emerge within by each individual making a conscious decision to cross over from being a benign follower to being a leader of themselves first, followed by their families and ultimately their country. For according to Bolton (2012).

The idea that westerners hold the key to Africa's development is, of course, a myth-not to mention patronizing. As I quickly learned, most of the answers lie, as they should, in the levels of African countries themselves and especially their governments (p. 3).

As earlier noted, lack of purposeful leadership, conflicts, and basically corruption are internal problems that have been the bane of African development and the failure of the continent's government to achieve progress. This is instructive because how come that none of the forty-eight nations south of the Sahara have made sustained progress since most achieved independence in the 1960s except maybe one or two states with exceptional natural resources? The reasons for Africa's devastating poverty level are so unreasonable that its presidents should feel ashamed to refer to themselves as leaders over the years. For it they were, one would have expected them to rise to the challenge to try and resolve the crisis, which manifests not only as poverty, but senseless ethnic and communal wars, killings, and destruction as seen in Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, and the likes today. African leaders have, down the years, continued to act and behave as if they are waiting for a savior to solve their problems for them and for the problems to vanish on their own accord. The world is seen to be moving so fast that the African and, indeed, the black people stand a candidate of being annihilated if something conscious and fast is not done to stem the tide. Maybe a conscious revolt would be the way out.

3 THE ABSURD

To be precise, the question of the human condition as seen from the preceding narrative of the African continent or the Black Man does not reflect that it is only the blacks that have gone through such distortions in history. In fact, the entire human race has been in such situations in one way or another. History is replete with the problems of the holocaust in Europe, the American civil wars, and the likes. The one difference between Africa and the other peoples of the world is that the Black Man has remained in a vicious cycle with little effort to get out of the woods. "It is surprising, if not illogical, that not too many people have ever wondered whether a Black Man exists at all" (Stevens 2011, p. 19). Stephens also wondered that if a Black Man does exist at all, what could be the reason why he is constantly in a state of disease and backwardness. Can a human being worth its name ever exist in that human condition without trying to do something different to change his situation positively? Are there likely grounds for one to assume that the inaction of the Blackman in the face of apparent adversity is sure proof of the lack of existence? Another question to ponder is why it is African and not any other person that is the cause for his problems?

It is not the case that institutional policies are not on the ground or adequate to pull the continent out of its problems. The manpower may here be suspect, but can that be ultimately so? This work is of the position that the missing link has been the willpower to revolt against this absurd in what the existentialist philosophers have preached and practiced over the period. Since the most fundamental issues today are existential, especially in Africa, the nature of recent philosophy can link it back to existentialism. What should I do to change my present situation? What does it mean to be a human being and especially so in Africa? What values may I consider as foundational, and how do I affirm anything for myself in a world that is basically relativistic?

As shown above, there is a concern for the personal meaning and significance of life in all of this. This was exactly what the existentialists were concerned about within the heady years, when austerity was mixed with hope after the Second World War. With great hindsight, existentialism as a movement became a rebellion against an emerging tendency that saw science and theoretical explanation as avenues that define life. Against such a popular narrative, the movement wanted an awareness that was fully embedded in life, which is a philosophy that would offer personal freedom and that which would equally revolt against the absurd. Maybe and strongly so, that is what the Africa of the future needs. "Ogar and Edor (2021) had argued for a "creative cultural synergy for the Africa of the future (p. 143), taking into cognizance the myriad of the problem facing the continent, this synergy would be seen to work when there is a conscious revolt.

4 THE EXISTENTIALIST CHALLENGE

The term existentialism has been used to cover the works of a wide range of 19th and 20th century thinkers ranging from Kierkegaard to Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, and many others (Reynolds 2014). Some of them have even objected to the term and denied that it applied to them. Even so, there are grounds for at least loosely grouping them together, those thinkers to whom the name has most frequently been applied. This is as a result of the fact that they share certain general starting points. The rejection of a system of philosophy that finds its classic formulation in Kierkegaard's works and a commitment instead to the elucidation of individual lived experiences as the grand aim of the philosophic activity (Stewart 2011). Taking the movement as a whole, this commitment has indeed led to a tendency to conceive as an intrinsic phenomenon. Man has been conceived as the autonomous possessors of their own subjectivity, the creators of their own values and shapers of their destinies. But such a blanket categorization of existentialism misses the many divergences within the movement. In particular, it obscures the fact that in one strand there has emerged a far more sustained and significant consideration of the social aspects of subjectivity that the general characterization acknowledges.

The movement covers a mode of philosophy that focuses on the existing individual person; instead of searching for the truth in distant universal concepts, it deals with the genuine concerns of authentic existing individuals as they face

choices and decisions in daily life. A man from this perspective is not part of an ordered metaphysical scheme, but that an individual must create their being, each in his specific circumstance and situation. Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, two of the most prominent existentialist philosophers, were concerned with the human condition and the absurd (Ogar 2005; Golomb 2012). His experience shaped Sartre's sense of the absurd during the Second World War. The German occupation of France drove home the fact that evil is not a mere abstraction but rather real and concrete. Sartre, therefore, concluded that there is a need to break loose and reveal the absurd. "Failure to face the absurd is always accompanied by excessive denials, which prevents us from recognizing evil for what it is" (Soccio, 2015, p. 548). With this reality of the absurd, he reasoned it was neither the fault of man nor his merit that life was lived when torture was a daily fact. After the holocaust caused by the Nazis, a generation shared a nauseating vision of the absurd. The sense of the war and the holocaust brought the resistance that followed the revolt.

The absurd Hero in Albert Camus was captured in his work, "The myth of Sisyphus". What a horrible punishment for Sisyphus, who was condemned and assigned a futile task of rolling an enormous stone up a steep hill throughout eternity. For Camus, our salvation and indeed that of Sisyphus can only come when we first accept the absurd, that is, the unfair relationship between us humans and the world, and then revolt against it. Reflecting on Sisyphus's conditions, Camus discovered a strategy for transcending the absurdities of our lives. We, humans, are in a relationship with the world (Richardson 2012). For Camus therefore, life could be lived all the better because it has no objective meaning. Once consciousness recognizes the absurd, the only way to live authentically is to embrace the absurd through conscious revolt. It is a truism that most often than not, our hopes as individuals, groups, and even as a continent get dashed and squeezed by the constant discord between us and the world.

However, what, one might ask, has the Black Man's burden got to do with existentialism as a movement. Leaping what Sartre and Camus remind us, we must choose one thing or the other. Not choosing is not an option. They remind us of the dangers of excuse-making and fatalism. At a time like this, when Africa is in dire need to jump away from its present decadent and imperious situation of poverty, civil strife, hunger, starvation, and general decay, we need such reminders. Since we do not know exactly where the thin line between freedom and determinism is, we cannot escape into excuses. Africa may have had its tendencies and limits, which are the facticity's of life; the existentialists have reminded us that we are not born cowards or heroes. We rather become what we do and become.

But what does the preceding narrative portend for the Africa of today and the future? Existentialism? Does anyone take that movement seriously anymore? According to Krucks (1991); "Indeed today the very name existentialism has a quaint and old-fashioned ring. It evokes images of Parisian Café life and jazz cellars in the late 1940's of earnest but faded novels about anguish and the absurdity of life" (p. 1). To buttress the point made above, Krucks (1990) was emphatic on the irrelevance of existentialism in today's world, as the movement has been described as a relic of a bygone era that dropped from the French intellectual scene in the early 1960s were the star of structuralism rose. With this outburst, it is reasoned that the movement has outlived its usefulness as we today live in a century of fast-moving intellectual fashions.

The devastating attack, as shown above, is not unfounded because, after the decline of existentialism, structuralism, post-structuralism emerged, and many others in that order. However, let us reflect on this; has man addressed the fundamental pressing questions about human existence? About what is human life? About why are we what we are? About what does it mean to be an authentic individual? The existentialist movement was radically different from earlier and later thinkers in their concern with the present world. Existentialists confronted the pressing issues of their age and attempted to find answers drawn from experience and not from abstract reasoning. They looked at the whole of human life, its goals, significance, and responsibilities, that is, what it means to be a human being in the world. These they did with some basic themes of optimistic toughness, authenticity, conscious revolt, and commitment. Existentialism happens when philosophy hits the streets and engages with the questions thrown up by ordinary life; hence, it is a living movement with no time frame for relevance.

5 CONCLUSION

Africa and its people can draw a good lesson from this living movement by embracing its major themes of revolt understood in the existentialist parlance to address the continent's burden of the absurd. Existentialism conquered Paris in 1945 after the city was liberated from Nazi rule with startling suddenness and saw in it a movement that could provide answers to the pressing existential questions of the day. There is no doubt that the most pressing issues facing Africa today are existential. Therefore, the existential approach should and must be embraced towards finding solutions. Since we cannot determine the circumstances in which we find ourselves, we are free to decide how we will understand and respond to them consciously. The existentialist may have had a dim light over the years that remain a flashpoint for the Africa of today and the future.

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