

THE HUMAN CONDITION: A CONSTANT CONFRONTATION WITH THE ABSURD

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Abstract

The human condition is marked by an unending tension between the search for meaning and the apparent indifference of the universe. This tension, described by existentialist thinkers such as Albert Camus, manifests as the absurd, that is, a paradoxical confrontation between humanity's longing for order and the world's silence. This paper explores the nature of the absurd as an unavoidable aspect of human existence, highlighting its philosophical, psychological, and ethical dimensions. By drawing on existentialist thought, the study examines how the absurd permeates daily life, shapes human freedom, and compels individuals to confront their finitude. Rather than leading to despair, this confrontation offers the possibility of authentic living through acceptance, rebellion, and creative self-definition. The paper argues that the absurd is not merely a philosophical abstraction but a lived reality that reveals the fragility, resilience, and transformative potential of human existence.

Introduction

In the hierarchy of creatures, the primacy of the human being over lower animals in the world is an obvious and indisputable fact. There are really different accounts of the coming to be of creatures in the world. These accounts include – creationism, evolution, big bang, among others. Whichever account one subscribes to, the human being is at the highest echelon of the created order. Man's uniqueness and excellence can be seen from a number of perspectives. These perspectives could be located as highlighted by the different epochs of history. From the ancient, man's excellence lay in his reason which stands him out among the animals. During the medieval era, the excellence of the human being was ascribed to his being made in the image of God – *imago Dei*. During the following period of the Renaissance, man was portrayed to be worth more than being made in the image of God. Man was seen and regarded to share in the nature of God by participating in the creative act as manifested in the works of the artists, painters and sculptors. The modern period, with the development of the concepts of rights and dignity brought about another unique dimension of the human being. The epoch brought to the fore that certain inviolability that inheres in every human being; that worthiness for which the human being can never be regarded as a thing but a being that is always an end in itself and never a means to an end.

In spite of all these high representations of the human being, observations and even studies have shown that man remains the most debilitated of all primates both in growth and in development. Although, all of man's quest in the search for knowledge have been efforts at trying to understand better himself, his environment and his world, the fact is that man remains an enigma. Donceal (1967) captures this aptly when he states that "There always remain perpetually in us those areas of the unconscious. After many years of scientific investigation, man remains an enigma to himself."

Originally, man was considered to have been endowed with a predetermined essence. It was the view that man was created or came to be with a fixed nature or essence. This belief held sway until the emergence of the existentialist tradition in philosophy. It was this tradition that saw to the total reconstruction and reversal of the notion of the human being. Existentialism promoted the view that existence precedes essence. This view is the result of the work of existentialists who decided that the authentic task of philosophy should be the investigation of the being (human) with an existential experience. For them, the primary task of philosophy is the interrogation of the human condition.

In their inquiry, they came out with the view that man was at best a self-creating being. In the face of the numerous, sometimes opposing choices for which one must be held responsible and the numerous elements of facticity that condition his existence, life can be meaningless or in another respect absurd. Frost Jr (1962: p.127) captures it thus:

Is man free to mould his destiny, or is he a mere straw in the wind of fate? Do our ideas, Hopes, acts and will mean anything in the universe? Is it true, as some hold that we come from the unknown, and are buffeted around by forces of which We have no control, and at least return to the unknown.

Absurdity is the case of the one who chooses what to do but cannot do it for reasons of his own failings, or other intervening forces beyond his control. Absurdity results when one looks and cannot find what he expects to find; when one works and cannot get the results he expects to get. Man in the world seems to be a victim of the

absurdities that constantly confront him. This paper is an attempt to examine the human condition in the light of the absurdities that confront it and to reach a decision whether life is truly meaningful or not.

Conceptualisation of Human Nature and Human Existence

A discussion of the subject of the human condition must preclude an understanding of the human being in his nature and his existence. Although, it is contentious to argue that man is born with some kind of fixed nature. Mondin (1985: p. 146) states that in classical philosophy, especially in traditional metaphysics, it was held by philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, Plotinus, among others, that man exists to fulfill some purpose in existence. They considered man as a natural being, that is, a being constituted of an immutable essence that is given from nature, from which he derives not only the biological laws but also moral precepts. In their view, man has a universal nature, is determined and therefore lacks freedom of negation. As essentialists, they strictly affirm and hold that "essence precedes existence." On the other hand, Alfred North Whitehead would write to refute this view of nature that cannot be modified. Whitehead (1967) states:

There persists ... a fixed scientific cosmology which presupposes the ultimate fact of an irreducible brute matter, or material, spread through space in a flux of configurations. In itself such a material is senseless, valueless, purposeless. It just does what it does do, following a fixed routine imposed by external relations which do not spring from the nature of its being. It is this assumption that I call 'scientific materialism.' Also it is an assumption which I shall challenge as being entirely unsuited to the scientific situation at which we have now arrived.

However, it should suffice to state here that the human being is a being of many parts and many dimensions. Man can be examined from his rational, biological, intelligent, social, environmental perspectives or more, hence there are different kinds of functional frameworks through which he can be rendered. Okonkwo (2009: p.2) writes that "...human beings in their different worldhoods manipulate their given possible *urstoff* mutatis mutandis." This becomes clearer when it is understood that the life that is lived and the factors that condition it are dynamic.

In the discussion of the varied components of human nature, Okonkwo (2007: p.189) states that "Human evolution is a continuous configuration pattern for the cultivation of human-kind not only in terms of individual components and traits but more of the cultivation of meaningful human organisation in anticipation of integration, direction, consensus and control." Thus, the human being is in the world not just as an entity but as a project of involvement and engagement. This was also highlighted in Omenkor (2014) who observes that the history of man is not just the daily accounts of the activities of individuals, groups and peoples, but everything that take place in and revolves around the human condition in relation to the environment. Teilhard de Chardin as cited by Byrne and Maziarz (1969) affirms this when he states that it is man who brings about the harmonization of the world.

Human existence could further be described as the being and the set of characteristics including behaviours, thoughts and thought patterns, language, work, play, emotion and the environment that human beings share in common. This implies again that man is a multifaceted existent whose existence could be viewed from different ways – including biological, socio-political, philosophical, among others. As biological, the human being is one species of mammals. In this regard, Russell (1992) describes the human being thus:

He can live in all climates and in every part of the world where there is water. His numbers have increased and are increasing faster. He owes his success to certain things which distinguish him from other animals: speech, fire, agriculture, writing, tools and large-scale co-operation.

From a socio-political dimension, even the ancients agree that man is both a social and a political animal. What this means is that man needs both the society and the polity to achieve his full humanity. In this same sense, the modern German idealistic philosopher, G. W. F. Hegel viewed man as an enclosed reality whose actions are determined by the society he lives in. Sartre (1946: p.38) in proposing a philosophy of self-creation acknowledges the usefulness of the world to man when he opined that "Without the world there is no self-hood, no person, without self-hood, without the person there is no world."

Philosophically, man is rational, intelligent and lives with an existential experience. These three dimensions of the philosophical were succinctly captured by the French philosopher, Auguste Comte who presented an epochal classification of the stages of human existence and development. Comte observes that the society develops in relation to the development of the human mind. Thus, what the mind is capable of thinking signify the level of development the society will reflect. For him, man in his existence has gone through three stages – the theological, the metaphysical and the positivist. Comte believed that evolution was the growth of the human mind, splitting into stages and evolving through these stages. Comte concluded that society acts similarly to the mind (Delaney, 2003).

The point here is that man is a multifaceted being whose existence is a configuration of involvement and engagement. These interconnections manifest from and in the human condition.

The Human Condition

According to the online *wiktionary*, the human condition is defined as the characteristics, key events and situations which compose the essentials of human existence such as birth, growth, emotion, aspirations, conflict and mortality. For philosophers of the existentialist tradition, contemplation of the human condition should be the main task of philosophy. As a matter of fact, many philosophers have conceptualized human nature and human existence as seen in the human condition. These encapsulations have led to such terms as “worldhood,” “life-form,” “life-world” and others (see Omenukor 2017, p.2). These concepts are not just new ways of studying man, but represent as Okonkwo (2009: p.6) observes that “The main issue is that the form of life conception is a conception that human persons in all conceivable worldhood activities, maintain the centrality for the understanding and interpretation of the revolution and involvements in the fatality-matrix of worldhood relations.” Succinctly put, all activities by, of, and on man take place in and revolve around the human condition. Molina (1996) captures this clearly when stating that:

The being of worldly entities can be considered as one with the being of the person in the sense that entities can have meaning in virtue of their being set in a matrix of signification determined by the concern over the world on the part of a person (viewed as being-in-the-world). This matrix of meaning, essentially characterized by relations of reference, constitutes the worldliness of the world.

Existentialist philosophers have tried the most in the contemplation of the human condition. Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish religious philosopher saw the human condition in the three stages of life. For him, everyone passes through three stages. Namely – the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. The life of the aesthete is the life of obsession with pleasure. It is a life in which one pursues after a lot of pleasure and also later discovers that pleasure does not satisfy. In the ethical stage, the one begins to recognise moral values and yet this does not ensure authentic existence. Hence the one must experience the conversion into the religious stage where, through the leap of faith, he finds himself in the presence of the subject (God). It is only this experience that makes one a free man.

For the German existentialist, Martin Heidegger, the key word for the human condition is worldhood. In this experience, man is thrown into the world that is already fixed in a number of respects. Man is in the world in the midst of other existents as a being-in-the-world. In this experience, man as *Dasein* – the being with an existential experience, must extricate himself from the crowd of existents, create meaning for himself and for the other existents. All these must be achieved in the face of the facticity of the world and also in the face of an impending death as he is also a being-unto-death. For man to get lost in the crowd is to live an inauthentic life. But to assert one’s self by creating meaning for one’s life is to live authentic existence.

Jean-Paul Sartre, the French existentialist in defending the fundamental existentialist doctrine of existence precedes essence, urges humans to completely abandon the traditional notion of human beings as the carefully designed artifacts of a divine creator. For him, there is no abstract nature that one is destined to fill. Being human just means having the capacity to create one’s essence in time (Omenukor, 2016, p.75). Sartre maintains that the human being is absolutely free and in freedom, man gives meaning to his own life and to the whole of the world. In this freedom, humans are confronted with choices which they must make. Man cannot not choose, because the decision not to choose is choice made. And every choice brings about a responsibility, hence in the face of the numerous choices, man lives in anguish which can get to abandonment and even despair. For Sartre, one can live in self-deception when one attempts to evade responsibility for one’s choices.

Friedrich Nietzsche conceived a world in which there is the total collapse of traditional morality and the world’s value system. Nietzsche, in seeking to understand the collapse of the universal value system leading to such evils as the holocaust, concluded that God is dead. And as such, he urged everyone to rise up and become a superman creating one’s own values. The French Christian existentialist, Gabriel Marcel decried modern civilization for its depersonalization and thingification of the human being. Marcel renounces the situation in which man is objectified; his dignity, worth and value ignored. Marcel lamented that the pursuit of possessions robs the human being of his freedom and separates him from the experience of his own participation in being. For Marcel, the human being is fulfilled in inter-subjectivity (Omenukor, 2016, 87). The individual must transcend himself or herself and make himself or herself available to the other. This encounter of the “I” and the “thou” in conversation creates the “we.” In this model, if one recognises the personality of the other, the one enhances his or her own personality.

Albert Camus saw the human condition as absurd. He conceived life as in a myth like that of Sisyphus who was

condemned by the gods to roll a huge stone up the top of a cliff. As much as Sisyphus tried to roll the stone up, it rolled back to the foot of the cliff. And yet this exercise must continue and the result thereof is hopelessness. Camus (1994: p.21) puts it this way:

What then is that incalculable feeling that deprives the mind of the sleep necessary to life? A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a provided land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting is properly the feeling of absurdity.

No matter whose views one may subscribe to here, there is no doubt that life's existential experiences bring about a lot of the absurd, hence it is possible to conceive of life as a constant confrontation with the absurd.

Human Existence and the Absurd

The absurd in philosophy could be said to describe the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life and the inability to find it. It describes the condition of man when expectations have not been met. It is important to note here that the absurd is not separately caused by the universe or the human mind, rather it results from the contradictory nature of both existing simultaneously. This may be why Silention (1843: p.17) avers that the absurd does not mean logically impossible but rather humanly impossible.

The whole of existentialist philosophy could be said to have arisen from a contemplation of the absurd nature of human existence. All of philosophy and the whole of human knowledge have progressed through system-building. That is, thinkers coming up with models that, for them are sufficient in explaining reality. The irony however, is that from time to time in that progression, systems have displaced systems. Instead of the systems foreclosing human knowledge, they have rather succeeded in opening up new questions that also demand equal attention. For instance, idealism which seeks to explain all of reality in terms of ideas have been overturned by its different variants including, but not limited to - ontological idealism, subjective idealism, transcendental idealism, and others, and leaving out questions as to the material dimensions of reality. In the same vein, realism, in its different variants like materialism, physicalism, among others, has also not foreclosed the idealistic dispositions of reality.

This must be the driving force for the existentialists to project a philosophy which seeks to establish whether or not there is meaning in life. Most of the existentialist philosophers began their work with a conceptualization of the meaninglessness of life. Soren Kierkegaard, having classified existence into three stages, attested to the meaninglessness of the life of the first two stages before proffering a solution in the third. In describing the human condition and its absurdity, Kierkegaard states:

... in spite of or in defiance of the whole of existence he wills to be himself with it, to take it along, almost defying his torment. For to hope in the possibility of help, not to speak of help by virtue of the absurd, that for God all things are possible – no, that he will not do. And as for seeking help from any other – no, that he will not do for all the world; rather than seek help he would prefer to be himself – with all the tortures of hell, if so it must be.

Martin Heidegger saw the thrownness of man as an expression of the nihilism that condition human existence and proffered that authentic existence consists in man isolating himself from the crowd, creating meaning for himself and for the other existents. Sartre began his existentialism by urging man to abandon the traditional notion of humans as carefully designed artifacts of a divine creator and to take one's destiny in one's hand. For Sartre, to be human simply means having the capacity to create one's own essence (Omenukor, 2016, p.75). To dwell in that old notion is to live in meaninglessness because what one becomes in life is entirely up to the one.

Discussion of the absurd gained prominence in the work of the French existentialist, Albert Camus who maintained that the individual should embrace the absurd condition of human existence while also defiantly continuing to search for meaning. The absurdity of life could be said to account for the restlessness of the individual who knowingly or ignorantly of the nihilistic tendencies of living in the world is ever committed in the search for meaning. It is the constant confrontation of the absurd in life that keeps man always anxious. This anxiety breeds anguish as the individual seeks to understand the fruitlessness of his search. This search for meaning is manifested in the different endeavours to which individuals commit themselves. Anguish leads to abandonment when the fruitlessness of one's search leads him to believe that he is on his own without any support. Despair sets in when this process leads to one feeling a complete sense of hopelessness.

In the face of the absurd in life, everyone is a victim. The individual sometimes is a victim of his own actions when he has wittingly or unwittingly brought about the wrong consequences for himself. The individual is also a

victim of other people who knowingly or unknowingly act in diminution of humanity. Finally, the individual is a victim of the elements that ensure that nature is active beyond the interference of man. Summarily, in the presence of the absurd in life, everyone is a victim of fate.

Conclusion

At birth, man is just a “being-there” characterised by nothingness, meaninglessness and hence without value. He gains meaning to his life through subsequent positive choice of action. Man creates his value and essence, and by so doing he defines his reality since there is no transcendent being to conceive or define it for him. For this reason of self-architecture, Sartre stated categorically that man makes himself. According to him, the cause of this strive in man is the consciousness for it creates in him the awareness of the lack in its being and this propels man into the act of projection and search for perfection as well as fulfillment. In striving for this completion, he transcends his status quo. The journey of self-creation is the journey of transcendence. It is a task everyone must undertake since we are a cultural being. Mondin (1985) in respect of this fact, states:

Man is not a natural, but a cultural being: This means that at 'the moment of birth, nature gave man hardly the necessary minimum, the essentials to be man, and assigns him the task of making himself and forming himself so as to fully realize his being through culture.

The journey of life is one that is always confronted by the absurd. In this journey, the seeming meaninglessness of life always stairs the individual in the face. However, Soren Kierkegaard and Albert Camus, among the other existentialists have proffered solutions to the absurdity of life. These solutions seem to direct attention to where meaning can be found in life. One of such solutions is suicide – that is, escaping existence. As a matter of fact, one of the strongest motives for the individuals who probably have reached the level of despair in life is to end his life. The existentialists agree that this is not a viable option. For Camus, suicide does not counter the absurd but the act of ending one’s life only becomes more absurd. Everything begins with the absurd because for him, the absurd is not the conclusion of a train of thought but the beginning of a new life in rebellion against the absurd. Camus (1995: p.4) states:

Man stands face to face with the irrational, he feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of his confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.

Another solution is to accept the absurd. This implies continuing to live in spite of it. In this regard, Sartre maintains that the individual must always keep faith with oneself or else love in self-deception. Living in self-deception is the attempt by the individual to evade responsibility. Camus endorses the solution of accepting the absurd as he believes that by accepting the absurd, one can achieve the greatest extent of one’s freedom, and that by recognizing no religious or other moral constraints and by revolting against the absurd while simultaneously accepting it as unstoppable, one could possibly be content with the personal meaning constructed in the process. Although, Kierkegaard would reject this option describing it as “demonic madness.” Kierkegaard (1941) writes: “He rages most of all at the thought that eternity might get it into its head to take his misery from him.”

Furthermore, another solution is to seek support from the supernatural. This solution presupposes belief in the existence of a reality that is beyond the absurd and as such has meaning. In this regard Kierkegaard proposes the leap of faith maintaining that a belief in anything beyond the absurd requires an irrational but perhaps necessary religious acceptance of such an intangible and empirically improvable thing. In the leap of faith, man seeks to move beyond the logical and material sphere to reach the subject before whom he can find freedom. On the other hand, Camus would regard this solution as philosophical suicide.

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