



Towards Authentic Existence in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Philosophers have formulated concepts and ideas as means of defining the world or describing man and human existence. One of such formulations is Martin Heidegger's concept of authentic existence. Heidegger's divide of authentic and inauthentic existence is a philosophical classification of human beings in the world. The painful deduction from a critical reflection of the classification is that majority of people are living inauthentic lives. This is a great tragedy and the tragedy is the backdrop to this paper, "Towards Authentic Existence in Africa." The goal of the paper is to promote authentic existence on the part of many people in Africa, which will impact positively on the continent in terms of development, harnessing the resources and improving the rating of Africa in the world.

Keywords: Authentic and inauthentic existence, Africa, Standing out, Crowd and Choice.

INTRODUCTION

Contrary to the impression of some people, philosophy is not an abstract concept, irrelevant to life. Rather, philosophy promotes an enriched life in view of the fact that it encourages reflective thinking and examining the quality of one's life. As Socrates affirmed, "the unexamined life is not worth living." The presupposition is that out of such an examination, a better quality of life is attained. This is why reason plays a great role in philosophy, since reason is the means to carry out such an examination as it is also a tool to search for knowledge in pursuance of the nature of the ultimate reality in the world. Thus, as rational beings, reason is indispensable in living a meaningful and fulfilled life. And the more individuals that live the meaningful and fulfilled life in a given society, the better the society.

This paper focuses on Heidegger's authentic and inauthentic existence with the aim of promoting the latter among more people in Africa as a better option. The paper examines authentic and inauthentic existence and makes suggestions for authentic existence. It must be noted that at this historical moment when Africa is beset with many challenges, she should be open to ideas that can be of help to addressing the challenges and charting a better way forward. This is the relevance of authentic existence for Africans.

AUTHENTIC AND INAUTHENTIC EXISTENCE

Martin Heidegger was one of philosophers whose teaching birthed existentialism. Consequently, the reflection on the view of man existentialism reacted against will give further insights on these two types of existence. Existentialism reacted against the dehumanization of man, which saw man as a mere scientific object of study, who can be classified and predicted under certain conditions. Pirie Madsen, writing on Heidegger's historical context, commented:

In asking, 'What does it mean 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.¹

Writing in the same vein, Bogdan Costa asserted: "Mankind's crisis was, for Heidegger, the result of a 'fall' of Western thinking which, through improper concentration upon technological science, led to a

one-sided technical development whose logic is to culminate in the alienation of man to province of 'highly inauthentic way of being.'"² Thus inauthentic existence subsists in a lopsided description of man described above which in actual fact gives a distorted view of man.

Joseph Omoregbe linked this tendency with man's fallenness and described it thus:

The third essential feature of man is his fallenness. This aspect of man's being is his tendency to become an object in the world, thereby depersonalizing himself. In short, it is the tendency to alienate himself from his true self and live an inauthentic life. It is a tendency to become engulfed in the daily routine of mechanical or conventional life thoughtlessly.³

Omoregbe's comment again shows the role of reflection in living the authentic life. Reflection is necessary to enable an individual not to alienate himself from his true self or to help him to retrace himself if he does. This implies that the understanding of the authentic life and the ability to distinguish it from the inauthentic life is imperative to living the authentic life. In view of its dynamics, therefore, living authentically is a perennial challenge for those who want to live it. However, like many other worthy goals in life, the rewards will far compensate for the efforts.

Reflecting the same thought as expressed above, Joseph W. P. Philips affirmed:

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.⁴

Thus authenticity of life inheres in recognizing, affirming and manifesting one's uniqueness, the inter-relatedness one has with other human beings notwithstanding. This assertion is in line with Costa's submission 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."⁵

According to Charles B. Guignon, "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."⁶ Thus living the authentic life is swimming against the current. This assertion again is in line with the concept of existence as standing out. The reality of the authentic life explains why majority of people in the world do not attain it. Most people prefer to go the easy way, please others and live a life of conformity. The implication of this assertion with reference to Africa is that a re-orientation to life is needed by many Africans to be able to live the authentic life, the advantages of which are enormous for individual Africans and the continent as a whole. The critical issue of choice, which is a cardinal teaching of existentialism, is pivotal in living authentically. Existentialism regards choice as the means through which man realizes himself. Omoregbe articulated this emphasis of existentialism thus: "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."⁷ And linking choice with freedom, he further asserted, "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."⁸

Commenting on Heidegger's word for human existence, *Dasein*, "being there," William L. Reese wrote:

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. To be inauthentic is to be characterized by a kind of ambiguity in which one's relation is to the crowd and the requirements of daily life rather than to oneself.⁹

In a similar vein Anthony Flew asserted, "The authentic self is potentiality for action, characterized by its orientation towards the future, entailing possibilities and the constant necessity of choice."¹⁰ The crucial issue of choice is a great challenge to Africans. We must accept responsibility for our actions to live authentically and to progress to realize our potentials. The more we blame our problems, mistakes and failures on witches and wizards, or even other human agents, we shall never accept the challenge to overcome them. The tendency to refuse to accept responsibility has also impacted our collective leadership as a people. The present situation in Nigeria is a good illustration of this tendency to pass the buck. Despite the unprecedented spate of killings going on in Nigeria, President Muhammadu Buhari has variously said that those responsible for the killings were offshoots of Gaddafi's government and sponsored by Libya. The opposition has also been mentioned as the scapegoat for the senseless killings in the nation. The colossal loss of lives and destruction of properties which the dangerous tendency of not accepting responsibility has brought testifies to its disaster when perpetuated by especially those who are in leadership whose words and actions literally determine the destiny of many including generations yet unborn.

It is significant to underscore the fact that as individuals and even as nations, we always have choices. Sometimes people feel and even say they have no choice but in many instances this is not correct. Ultimately, our choices determine what we shall become in life. What we are now is the outcome of our previous decisions. What we shall become tomorrow would be the outcome of our decisions today. One concern in Nigeria today is the growing suicide cases, especially among the young people. Suicide can be fueled by the feeling that one has no other choice. The fallacy of such thinking can be seen in the fact that many other people who have had even greater challenges had prevailed over the challenges and achieved great and mighty things. In the final analysis, what happens to an individual is not as important as his/her reaction to what happens. The history of the world has shown uncountable evidences of the indomitable spirit of man, of man's ability to rise above tragedies and calamities. The truth is, the Lord God Almighty has given us more than enough resources to cope with the challenges of life. This is in line with the biblical affirmation in 2 Peter 1: 3 – 4: "His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness."

In a further elucidation on the subject of discussion, the following comments are apposite:

The existentialists emphasize choice as the distinguishing mark between authentic and inauthentic existence. To exist inauthentically is to understand oneself as a purely scientific object, a part of nature to be studied. This is the natural man who when flooded by anxiety challenging him to be what he ought to be hides himself in the ground. The inauthentic man divides his time into past, present and future, and regards his being as being swept along by the momentum of temporary flux. Within such an understanding there is no possibility of a man rising out of the flux. There is no possibility of his becoming something different from the being which his culture has determined him to be.

The authentic man, on the other hand, understands himself in terms of his possibilities, his real future self, which he can choose in spite of his culture and his past. One great challenge that faces every human being is to live authentically and decision is very crucial in meeting this challenge. In other words, it is one's decision that will determine whether one lives authentically or not.¹¹

The above distinction shows that the authentic life is a life of possibilities, a life that is open to what one can still become and achieve, rather than a life that feels spent. Thus it is an optimistic life, a life of hope and an engaging life, and those who live the authentic life are generally more resilient than those who live the inauthentic life. It is significant to note that the life of possibilities which the authentic life underscores is available to the very end of one's life. This is why existentialists regard freedom as a basic condition of human existence.¹²

In the light of the above exposition of the authentic life, it is a panacea to the increasing sense of hopelessness and meaninglessness in Africa. Thus it will help many Africans to turn from the path of waste and destruction and make significant contributions to the society. Thereby, some of the endemic African problems will be addressed and this will facilitate the actualization of the greatness of Africa. It will also help a greater number of people to develop self-esteem, provide a more conducive environment for Africans to live, move Africa forward and facilitate the greatness of the continent. At this time when

Africa seems to be at the crossroad and beset with so many challenges, especially the challenge of relevance in the world, Heidegger's authentic life offers a great help to Africans in the way forward. That is to say, it is my considered view that if more African leaders and people live authentically, the great potentials of Africa would be realized and Africa's rating in the world would improve significantly.

TOWARDS AUTHENTIC EXISTENCE IN AFRICA

Having examined authentic and inauthentic existence, the paper now gives suggestions towards achieving authentic existence.

1. Reason

Africans need a greater openness to reason as a tool for enriching authentic existence in the continent. The seeming contradiction between religion and reason, which has promoted some measure of doubt about reason, should be jettisoned. God is the God of all faculties of life and all aspects of life are under His control. God has endowed man with the rational capability purposefully to be used for an enriched and meaningful life.

Another aspect of African life where reason will help is in the overemphasis on the forces of darkness and the deterministic view of life which an erroneous understanding of destiny promotes. This has encouraged an uncritical view of life that has robbed many of their potentials and blessings in life and hindered them from living the authentic life.

Finally, reason will promote a more critical analysis of issues which promotes rich debates, alternative viewpoints and critical evaluation of policies. In the public space, this will enhance a more conducive environment instead of the situation where those who express alternative ideas are seen as "enemies" with the attendant dissipation of energy or even wastage of resources such as attitude fosters.

In view of the nexus between the individual and the group in Africa and the impact of the societal context for the individual to live authentically, it is imperative for the group to accord greater freedom to individuals to be themselves and explore their lives. This is far better than making people to fit into the group mold. With reference to the societal context, governments in Africa should show greater seriousness in addressing factors that inhibit reason at the broad levels of the society. Greater emphasis should be placed on education and such problems as child labour, political thugery, and violence should be addressed to enhance liberation of the minds of those held in bondage by the problems. The role of reason in manifesting authenticity is reflected in this comment of Reese: "Authenticity is possible only for one who has the attitude of *sorge*, that is, 'care.' And the attitude of care is possible only for the one who throws his being into question through *Angst* (anxiety). Through anguish one discovers his radical finite nothingness. Then one is able to accept himself as being destined to die, as *Being-toward-Death*."¹³ Unquestionably, there are millions in Africa who cannot engage in the critical rational thinking required for the kind of attitude described above. They should be assisted to develop their rational capability.

2. Standing Out of the Crowd

From the viewpoint of existentialism, this is the essence of human existence. To exist is to stand out of. This is a message that needs to be embraced by many more Africans. There is need for proper balance between the communal understanding of life which is part of the African heritage and the individuality of the human person.

It is significant to note that those who have blazed the trail, made discoveries and extended the frontiers of knowledge have been people who dared to be different, to think outside the box. Certainly those who think at the same level with the crowd cannot rise above the crowd, nor make significant impact on their generation. As being in the world, it is clear that man cannot detach himself from others because life cannot be lived in isolation. However, the idea of standing out from the crowd emphasizes living one's unique life, being free to chart one's course in life. It is significant to note in this regard that in the categorization of the overly scientific view which existentialism reacted against, a man becomes a wandering generalization among men losing his humanness in the sea of human beings. It can be affirmed that the erroneous view of man contributed to the dehumanization of man with concomitant sense of meaningless which characterizes the modern time.

Again, we need a more integrated relationship between the group and the individual in Africa. The balance tilts more towards people wanting to conform, doing things because others are doing them and not to ask critical questions. We need to remember that the strength of the group is the composite of those who make up the group. Therefore, we should create an environment for individuals who will be different, pursue their visions and purposes in life most passionately and thereby raise the collective standard of the group. And in actual fact the group must not be static but dynamic and be open to positive changes which can be initiated only by individuals who are different.

3. A Balanced Life

Man is both physical and spiritual, both personal and cooperate. Thus a balanced life is a life that relates well with the physical and spiritual dimensions of life, in one's own person and in relation with others. In a sense, an authentic life inheres in a balanced life. To live authentically, therefore, Africans must relate better with the physical world, the environment. We must live as responsible stewards of God's resources emphasizing creature care rather than reckless usage of the earth's resources, which has now posed great danger to the future of human existence on the earth through climate change, pollution, deforestation, erosion and so on.

Also, Africans must nourish the spiritual dimension of life, especially the relationship with God to live authentically. Whereas Africans are incurably religious, the African religious landscape is dominated more by religiosity than by true spirituality characterized essentially by godliness. Africans must bring their God-consciousness to bear on their daily lives and activities. In spite of religious houses preponderant in Africa, wickedness, injustice, corruption, armed robbery, violence and many other vices abound in Africa. So much so that we manifest the African paradox, the lack of commensurate correlation between Africa's abundant human and natural resources and the unenviable, pitiful state of Africa. Indeed, part of the problem of Africa is that many are using religion to oppress, subjugate others, and to commit many other injuries to other people.

In addition, authentic life includes development of one's potentials. It is a tragedy of human existence that whereas the best of humanity do not use half of their brain potentials, most people are hindered to blossom in life, filled with complaints about what they cannot do in life. In this regard Genesis 1:26-27 can be seen as God's mandate for greatness for each human being. "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." No doubt the human person is blessed with abundant resources which he cannot fully use.

Africans should appropriate the above mandate for greatness on a wider scale. They must do more to activate their energies and develop their potentials. They must transcend their limitations and barriers. This challenge can be related with the development of the continent itself. Ultimately, African problems can be solved by Africans. Africans must accept responsibility for their predicaments. Instead of finding scapegoats, we should make more concerted efforts to address our problems. The bane of bad leadership cannot but be mentioned in this regard. Except in few countries that have had good leaders, bad leadership has contributed greatly to the African challenge. Africa needs a new breed of leaders who will help her to actualize her potential greatness and enable her to occupy her rightful position in the comity of nations.

Furthermore, a balanced life is a life that is well related with others. This dovetails on the communal life which is one of Africans' rich heritage. Once again, there is a nexus between the individual and the group, and this is integral to living an authentic life. In the words of Guignon, "Because our lives are inseparable from our community's existence, authenticity involves seizing on the possibilities circulating in our shared 'heritage' in order to realize a communal destiny."¹⁴ However, this communal life is gradually being eroded by such factors as growing individualism, globalization, politics and even religion. Africans must stem the tide towards individualism and division. Again, leaders should beware of giving undue advantage to their tribes or people from their religion in the context of a heterogeneous community. This is one strong criticism against the present leadership in Nigeria. For instance, many of the key positions

have been given to people from the President's clan, tribe or religion. This is unfair to people of other tribes and against the communal spirit. While individuals have their lives to live, their group support should also be strong in the bid to maintain the group identity, survival and development. The understanding of communal life to the point of sacrificing people for the sake of the group in the traditional African society is a reminder of the need to make sacrifices for the group's wellbeing and survival.

4. A Significant Life

Living a significant life can be defined as the essence of life. The essence of life is making contributions. From this perspective greatness is a factor of contributions. A man/woman is great to the extent of the cumulative contributions he/she makes in life. Thus an authentic life is a significant life. Living a significant life corresponds to the life of actualization in Pavlov's hierarchy of needs. While such an individual may still have some of the lower needs, he/she is concerned more about making impact, touching lives, bringing changes and transformations and leaving legacies. Such a desire facilitates a life of urgency and the aspiration to make the most of one's opportunities in life.

From the above three comments can be made about the significant life. It is a purposeful life. One of the motivating factors in life is to live purposefully. Living purposefully fills one's life with meaning, zest and enthusiasm. It saves one from wandering aimlessly in life and it is a cure to the sense of meaninglessness that is consuming an increasing number of people all over the world. In the religious context, this can have a divine dimension from God of what he/she should be and do in life. The achieving of such a goal becomes the consuming passion of such a life. With reference to the authentic life, the person may have to do things contrary to others' expectations in the fulfillment of his/her purpose in life. Several biblical and historical characters attest to the reality of this assertion.

A biblical example is the great Apostle Paul. Sequel to his dramatic conversion recorded in Acts 9, and God commissioning him, his life took a completely new turn. He was consumed with the passion to fulfill God's mandate in his life. He dedicated himself to the fulfillment of his purpose in life. This manifested in extensive missionary journeys, preaching the gospel to multitudes, planting of several churches, and writing about half of the New Testament books. Even up till today, Paul has been a model of a minister of the gospel and an inspiration to Christians.

An example from history is Martin Luther who led the Protestant Reformation. Again, following his dramatic conversion, Luther challenged the Catholic Church of his day to reform which eventually led the Reformation movement. He composed hymns, wrote books, led the reformation in Germany and inspired the reformation in other countries. He has also become a great inspiration to Christians and has left legacies for the Church.

Also, it is a sacrificial life. Sacrifice is indispensable in living an authentic life. No worthwhile goal in life can be achieved without sacrifices. Thus anyone who wants to live an authentic life must be prepared to make sacrifices. But usually the achievement of the authentic life will far compensate for the sacrifices. Thus it can be inferred that a reason why some people do not live the authentic life is because they do not make the necessary sacrifices needed for such a life. Sacrifice has universal applications. Sacrifice is needed to tap the rich resources of the earth. It is needed to release the potential powers of man and it is needed to bring new life into being.

Then it is a courageous life. One needs the courage to stand for his convictions especially when they are different from those of the group. Similarly, one needs courage to be different from others, to fight a cause, to effect changes which may be necessary to live a significant life, to make contributions in the world.

5. Living in the Light of Eternity

We make bold to affirm that man is both a physical and spiritual being. Therefore, any discourse on man that neglects the spiritual dimension of his being is incomplete. Accordingly, our discussion on the authentic life incorporates the spiritual dimension of life. Since eternity is the ultimate destiny of man, one must live in the light of eternity to live authentically. Again, like living the significant life, living in the light of eternity challenges one to live maximally and for the glory of God. This will enable an

individual to avoid practices that would prevent the actualization of his potentials and help him/her to be of great benefit to humanity.

6. A Life of Reflection

Authenticity is not a position to attain; it is an attitude of life to maintain. Thus constant reflection helps to ascertain whether one is living authentically or not. With this, one will be able to ascertain one's attitude at any given point in time and retrace one's steps in case one has abandoned the attitude. The import of the above affirmation is that it is possible for one to regress into inauthentic life at any moment but reflection would help to bring one back at such a moment.

True reflection makes one to be honest with oneself and delivers from deception. Thus one is made aware of factors that may impede living authentically and be encouraged to address them. Constant reflection brings a depth of character and a profoundness of life which provide a basis to adequately pursue one's goals and work assiduously to overcome difficulties and challenges on one's way to live authentically. One way reflection does this is to remind one of similar challenges one has overcome in the past.

CONCLUSION

Philosophy at its best is philosophy creating better people and a better atmosphere for people to live meaningfully. One way philosophy can achieve this goal is by bringing insights from philosophers in addressing the problems and challenges people in a given context face. The article has attempted to achieve this goal of philosophy by examining Heidegger's concept of authentic life and making suggestions for its application by Africans. This is done with the view that the concept can promote a better understanding of life by Africans and thus help overcome some of the challenges facing Africa. Thereby, a new orientation would be created among Africans enabling them to further harness the enormous resources in the continent, realize their rich potentials and facilitate the actualization of Africa's greatness.

ENDNOTES

¹Madsen Pirie, 101 *Great Philosophers* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 163.

²Bogdan Costa, *Existence Philosophy and the Work of Martin Heidegger: Human Diversity as Ontological Problem*: <https://www.lums.lans.ac.uk>. Accessed: July 16, 2018.

³Joseph Omoregbe, *A Simplified History of Western Philosophers*, Vol. 3 (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited, 2005), 73.

⁴Joseph W. P. Philips, *Martin Heidegger: A Philosophical Biography*: <https://www.researchgate.net/publications/315688958>. Accessed: July 15, 2018.

⁵Costa, *Existence Philosophy and the Work of Martin Heidegger*.

⁶Charles B. Guignon, "Heidegger, Martin," *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge: University Press, 1999), 318-319.

⁷Omoregbe, 45.

⁸Omoregbe.

⁹William L. Reese, "Heidegger, Martin," *Dictionary of Philosophy & Religion* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1980), 216.

¹⁰Anthony Flew "Heidegger, Martin," *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1979), 144.

¹¹Simon A. Kolawole, *The Power of Decision* (Ogbomoso: Grace Publications, 2011), 5-6.

¹²Black Huber, *Handbook for Educational Philosophy* (Tennessee: Clevord, 2002), 326.

¹³Reese, 216.

¹⁴Guignon, 31.

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