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## A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CHRISTIAN AND SARTRE'S EXISTENTIALISM

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### **Abstract**

This paper through the comparative and critical methods x-rays the biblical and Sartre's analysis of the role of man in the fulfillment of his destiny or life aspirations. The paper, contrary to common belief, argues that Christian and Sartre's existentialism accept that existence precedes essence. However, though the two philosophies share the same point *de depart*, they differ in their *terminus ad quem* concerning man's role in the fulfillment of his destiny.

### **Introduction**

The glory of man as the apex of creation and the master of all created beings in – the – world as well as the inglorious realities of his existence makes any study of man especially his essential existential structures a welcome development. To this end, theological existentialism (of the Christian type) and the existentialism of Jean Paul Sartre are much discussed and reacted to as a result of their far reaching implications on human life and its destiny.

The life of man as a being – in – the world is characterized by dreams, desires, ambitions, aspirations and possibilities of becoming what he is presently not and birthing into reality the potentialities of his personality. This is a truism but of no less truth is the fact that man's existential life is equally characterized by weaknesses, sufferings, frustrations, hindrances, failures, limitations & death, what Heidegger (1973:231) sums up as facticities of human existence and what Albert Camus lamentably called absurdity (Camus, 1955:11-12).

Is man helpless in the face of these limitations, facticities and absurdities or are there possibilities of overcoming them so that man can enjoy the full realization of his destiny? Is there a pre-ordained destiny for man which man should wait and watch for its unfolding, the present conditions of his life notwithstanding, or is man's destiny, the reality of his present and the possibilities of his future, the product of his choices and actions *hic et nunc* as a being in –the –world? In other words, what should be the role of man in the pursuit of the realization of his destiny? Is it one of passivity or of personal engagement in active participation? This paper aims at providing answers to these and more questions of this nature through a comparative cum critical

analysis of ‘Christian existentialism’ and Jean Paul Sartre’s existentialism. There is a common belief that because Sartre’s existentialism is heavily atheistic, it sharply contrasts the Christian existentialism which is basically theistic. However, the paper argues that, with regards to the role of man in the pursuit and realization of his destiny, Christian and Sartre’s existentialism share the same thought and thus can be considered as partners in progress. That is, concerning man’s role in the fulfillment of his destiny, the two philosophies share the same point of departure but differ in their *terminus ad quem*.

### **A Restatement of Sartre’s Existentialism**

It is pertinent to first understand the meaning of the subject of discussion, hence the need for the definition of the term existentialism. According to Omoregbe, existentialism is the philosophy of human existence, a philosophy preoccupied with what it means for a human being to exist (Omoregbe, 1991:38). Here, the peculiar characteristic of human existence is described and analyzed. For the existentialists, human existence is presented as a drama in which every individual is an actor. This means to exist is to be actively involved in the activities and circumstances that shape one’s life. Thus human existence does not simply mean, being there and inactively involved in what happens to one’s life. Man is not a spectator but an actor in the drama of life (Coplestone, 1963:123). Some Igbo proverbial sayings articulate this. *Aka aja aja na ebute onu mmanu mmanu* which means your prosperity or success depends on your hardwork. Also sayings like *aguo na egbu onye umengwu* meaning hunger kills a lazy person accentuates the fact that man’s active participation in life is what defines his essence (Obioha, 2014:80). Omoregbe succinctly captures the thesis of existentialism as he quipped thus:

To exist means to be personally committed to a freely chosen way of life; it means being conscious of the problems of human life with the choices open to man freely opting for a certain way of life while assuming full personal responsibility for it. To exist is to be at the helm of one’s affairs, personally directing its main course it means really living one’s own life the way one has freely chosen and assuming responsibility for it (Omoregbe, 1991:38).

This is the understanding of existentialism that Sartre stood for, systematically developed, strengthened, amplified and popularized to the point that his name almost became synonymous with existentialism. Sartre says, “Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself and that this is the first principle of existentialism” (Sartre, 1969: 15). This statement is made on the strength that God does not exist, at least for Sartre. Therefore man is abandoned: thrown into existence and abandoned in the world.

This assertion of Sartre certainly has some philosophical implications. First, since there is no God, there is no maker of man and no such thing as a divine conception of man in accordance with which man was created. This further means that there is no such thing as a human nature that is common to all humans. There is no such thing as a specific essence that defines what it is to be human. Past philosophers, had maintained that each thing in existence has a definite, specific essence. For instance, Aristotle believed that the essence of being human is being rational (Moore & Bruder, 2002: 157). In contrast to this, for Sartre, the person must produce his/her own essence because there is no God who created human being in accordance with any divine concept or purpose. In fact, there is no divine destiny (essence) which human existence unfolds. Rather for Sartre, existence precedes essence meaning that man is simply what he makes of himself 'you are what you make of yourself'.

The second implication of the abandonment of man in the world as a result of the nonexistence of God is that there is no ultimate reason why anything has happened or why things are the way they are and not some other way. This means that the individual in effect has been thrown into existence without any real reason for being rather he is abandoned in the world to create his own future.

The third implication of our abandonment and the nonexistence of God is that there is no determinism. This means that man is free. In fact, according to Sartre, man is freedom. He is condemned to be free. He identifies freedom with the very being of man. Freedom is the being for consciousness and consciousness is the being –for-itself, which is the human being. Sartre states,

Freedom is precisely the nothingness which is made to be at the heart of man and which forces human reality to make itself instead of to be. Freedom is identical with my existence. This means that no limit to my freedom can be found except freedom itself (Sartre, 1969:441,439).

The freedom of man presupposes that nothing forces him to do what he does. Man is alone without excuses. He cannot excuse his action by saying that he was forced by circumstances or moved by passion or otherwise determined to do what he did. By his freedom, he freely chooses the type of life he wants to live and is therefore in total control of his destiny - the possibilities he has freely carved out for himself. This is how Cassius put it in Shakespeare's play, *Julius Caesar* "the fault is not in our stars but in ourselves..."

Does this mean that Sartre is not aware that there are elements or factors that can determine the choice of man's action or that can impede or limit the exercise of his actual capacities in action? In other words, is man absolutely free as Sartre would want us to believe? It appears that in real human experiential life, there are elements and factors that militate against human freedom and impede human action such as laws of physics and chemistry, that is, causal laws, hereditary conditions or instinctive movements,

historical, economic or productive forces, our past, death, environment and the existence of others (Odesanmi,2012:69-76).

B. F. Skinner quoted in Leslie (1980:96) is of the opinion that man is not free but is largely determined. He says,

There are two things that determine the action of man; that human behavior is governed by scientific laws of some kind; that is our behaviors are determined. And the second is that those laws state the causal connection between environmental factors and human behaviors.

The thought of skinner appears to be itself a corroboration of the assertion of Sigmund Freud that all phenomena are determined by the laws of physics and chemistry and that man himself is a product of natural evolution who is ultimately subject to the same laws. These factors, according to Freud, determine man's freedom namely instinctive drives which are internal in man, psychological factors like environment, parental influence, hereditary endowment and some genetic variants (Leslie, 1980:171).

In the same vein, Karl Marx opines that the nature of man is determined by historical events and economic or productive force (Leslie, 1980:190). "The totality of these relations constitutes the economic structure of the society..." (quoted in Wolemonwu & Augustine, 2015:126). Further he says, our past achievement as well as failures occupy dominant position on both our present and future actions for instance, a man's success or failure in the past determines the kind of project or action he will embark on, the help he will render to the public, his plans for the present as well as for the future and in fact, the new approaches he will adopt to escape the pit falls of the past (Marx, 1980: 191). Our functional abilities and achievements of the past shape man's thinking, his lifestyles, and his general weltanschauung (Obioha, 2016:28). John Hospers (1994:725) has this to say:

Man has been molded by influences which in large measure at least determine his behavior; this is to say that man is literally the product of these influences stemming from period prior to his years of discretion giving him a host of character traits that cannot be changed even if he would.

Perhaps, all these argument is a product of a misunderstanding of the point Sartre and indeed all like-minded existentialists are out to make. Therefore the idea of man being free to will and choose what he wants to be, and of a man making himself needs some explanation. Akinpelu explains that the existentialists are definitely aware of the political, social, cultural and economic factor that seem to hinder us from becoming what we want to be; but what they are saying is that there are always avenues for getting over such obstacles; that these obstacles can never determine one's life against one's choices. One can confront the obstacles as the realities of life and take appropriate steps to overcome them which is one option. Another option is

that one may choose to run away from them or avoid them by refusing to live in that particular society. Yet another option is that one may even decide to acquiesce or go along with the oppressive conditions. In other words in any situation there is always a choice (Akinpelu, 1988:155). Akinpelu's explanation notwithstanding, whatever option one chooses, it is a conditioned choice.

One important thing (among other relevancies) about Sartre's concept of human freedom is the issue of responsibility. That is, to every choice that a man makes, there are the inevitable consequences for which he must bear full responsibility. Man's freedom is therefore accompanied by a heavy and inescapable responsibility. Although man may not be the author of his being yet he is to assume full responsibility for his manner of being. Man is in charge of what he is, and what he will ever be. Freedom excludes him from making excuse about his present and future being. He cannot blame the consequences of his choice on the society, God or anything called destiny. In fact, Sartre's existentialism rules out anything called destiny understood as an essence affixed to every human being by God before the person is born only to be fulfilled here on earth. Contrary to this, destiny is what one makes of himself, of his existence or the possibility one creates for himself and takes responsibility for its realization.

### **An Understanding Of Christian Existentialism**

The choice of the term Christian existentialism is intentionally guided. Theistic existentialism and what in recent times is called existentialist theology (Bultman's Kerygma and Myth; T. S. Robinson's *Honest to God*, Tillich's *Systematic Theology*; Macquarie's *Principle of Christian Theology* etc) encompasses the existentialism of many religions within the theological circle of which Christianity is a part. The existentialism of these religions may indeed have one central and recurrent theme, but may also differ in their details and interpretation. The choice of Christian existentialism bridges the scope of the research. In the analysis of the thoughts of Christian existentialism as far as the existential condition of man and the realization of his destiny is concerned, Christian bible of Old and New Testaments will be the major text. As presented in the scriptures, man is part of the created order by a transcendental being called God. Man occupies the master position over and above the created order (Gen1: 26-30). There is therefore a relationship between God the creator and man the creature. As a master servant or potter-vaser relationship, there is a kind of dependency theory here. It appears man is dependent on God who is the originator/source and maintainer of his life. Certainly, this picture depicts a God-man relationship. But the question is, what is the nature of this relationship? Is it an active – passive or active – active relationship of God and man respectively in the context of the full realization of man's destiny or projected possibilities?

It is noted that in Sartrean existentialism, a denial of the existence of God is made with various philosophical implications arising from it. An observer may therefore expect the paper to engage Sartre in a debate towards the debunking of his position as regards the nonexistence of God. However, the scope of this paper will not allow this. Rather, the existence of God is accepted here as a given.

Man's relationship with God and his dependency on God for the realization of his projected possibilities is made possible on the platform of faith. Man relates to God by faith (Heb.11:6) and this faith is a product of man's choice with attendant responsibilities (Abioye, 2014:10). Man chooses to either relate with God or not and whatever choice he makes, he lives with the consequences of his choice. Man's faith in God is expressed by action, that is, man's faith is more of a question of what one does (action) than what one believes for faith without work is dead. "Show me your faith without your works and I will show you my faith by my works" (James 2:17-20).

Faith is action-driven. This means that faith is not passive but active. It is one's action that authenticates and validates faith, and one is justified by his or her faith-work and not just by mere belief. Faith is made perfect by works (James 2: 21-22). Abraham was justified by his works and earned the title of "God's friend" by works when he offered his son Isaac upon the alter of sacrifice. His belief in God was authenticated by his action of sacrificing Isaac and it was counted for him as righteousness (James 2:23). The proof of the validity of faith is in the results generated, and all through the bible (scriptures) are example of result- oriented faith generated by personal responsibilities (action/works) of those who engaged in such faith. The Red Sea got parted for the children of Israel only when Moses acted by touching the Red Sea with his rod and asking the people to go forward on the instruction of God. Faith starts from the heart but is expressed by (man's) action and until it is acted upon (by personal responsibility) it does not deliver results.

In Matthew chapter 9 verses 20 -22, a certain woman who was suffering with the issue of blood touched the hem of Jesus' garment and was healed. But before her healing came, she said in her heart, "if I may but touch his garment, I shall be made whole"- this is faith in her heart but that faith in the heart alone was not what got her the healing. She took personal responsibility by acting or touching Jesus' garment against all odds, her condition, the situation, and her frailty notwithstanding.

In the same vein, the book of the Gospel according to Mark chapter 2 verses 1- 12 presents the picture of a man suffering from Palsy who has faith in his heart that Jesus Could heal him. But he could not reach Jesus because of the crowd. However, an expression of his faith by his action made his friends to take personal responsibility by removing the roof of the house where Jesus

was ministering and lowering him right before Jesus. When Jesus saw their faith expressed by that action, the man with the Palsy got his healing.

Therefore the promises, thoughts, will of God for mankind which may be interpreted here as God's essences or destinies for mankind will forever remain as essences without any hope of realization or materialization until the person concerned takes personal responsibility by acting and living them into reality. Therefore it is our existence in concrete life situations of taking personal responsibility that makes sense of "our essences". Essences in themselves are therefore nothing but mere wishes and if wishes were horses, beggars would ride. Faith is practical. Believing is the beginning process of possibilities but taking action is what brings the possibilities to reality.

Christian existentialism believes that it is existence that makes possible essences. Existence is the driver of essences. To this end therefore, Christian existentialism celebrates existence but does not ignore faith in essence. Any faith that gives God the sole responsibility of our life is an irresponsible faith. For this reason Christian existentialism will not hesitate to condemn as irresponsible the faith of a man who is praying very hard for promotion but goes late to work every day. And then when he is given a query, he writes a list of the names of the people in his work place who he thinks are standing in the way of his promotion and praying that God should sack all of them for him to probably take their place. Christian existentialism celebrates the law of diligence. "Seest thou a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before mean men" (Proverbs 22:29).

### **Comparing Sartre And Christian Existentialism**

Analysis of Sartre's existentialism and Christian existentialism shows that they are not in all respect mutually exclusive. Both existentialism celebrates the place of existence in the full realization of man's projected possibilities - man's destiny is in his hands to actualize. Man's freedom commits him to make choice and whatever choice so made, man should take full responsibility of the consequences of the choice made. God is not responsible for whatever anyone finally becomes in life because if he/she fails in life, God is not to blame.

Both Christian and Sarterian existentialism emphasize that man has a virgin future which he is expected to fill by his action. Man can make good his life by what he chooses to do or not to do irrespective of seeming obstacles on his way and his background notwithstanding. The story of two men who went to the diviner's place to know what destiny holds for them is instructive here. Two men approached the IFA priest to know, through divination, their destinies. After due consultation with the gods, one was told that he will be very rich and wealthy while the other was told that his destiny is an unfortunate one, that he will be very poor and destitute and sadly enough, he will die in poverty and penury. The two men left the IFA priest happily and

sad respectively. The one with rich and wealthy *Ori* (destiny) was happy while, as expected, the one with bad/poor *Ori* was sad and worried. Let us designate the man with rich *Ori* as Oluwole and the one with poor *Ori* as Ugboaja.

Mr. Oluwole went about announcing and celebrating his upcoming riches and wealth; and wallowing in the euphoria of this new found revelation he, however, does nothing for the eventual actualization of this announced destiny. He folds his hands, perambulates about, does nothing and just waits for the unfolding of his riches and wealth. On the other hand, Mr. Ugboaja worried about this unfortunate revelation puts his thinking cap on and determining not to end up as revealed or prophesied, went into the country side, into a thick forest and cleared as much acres of land as he could and cultivated it with various farm products – yam, cocoyam, rice, beans, carrot, maize, Melon, cassava, vegetables etc and soon became a big time farmer. Fortunately for him and unfortunately for Mr. Oluwole, there broke out a serious famine in the whole region and soon all roads led to the country side where Mr. Ugboaja lives in the thick forest-turned a farm settlement. People were buying what they needed and soon Mr. Ugboaja became very rich and influential. Sadly enough, Mr. Oluwole did not have money but he must survive. He and his likes eventually became servants to Mr. Ugboaja in order to survive. The one who was told that he will be rich became poor and the other who was told that he will be poor, became very rich.

It is not out of place therefore to say that both Christian and Sartre's existentialism, in this context, breeds hope, courage and optimism for man and shows that man can make something out of a seeming hopeless life and situation and give meaning to his life. But this is done with the type of action one undertakes in life. Every man has a virgin future which he is expected to fill by his action, thus our failures and successes can only be traced to us and not to any force seen or unseen. The realization of this fact will obviously push man to action knowing full well that his actions and inactions are the basis for his failures or successes. Be that as it may, in our pursuit for the realization of our projected possibilities there are bound to be obstacles beyond our control. This is itself a testimony that man is not absolutely free contrary to Sartre's view. In the face of such, Christian existentialism subscribes to a – going – back- to- God for help in overcoming such obstacles or forces. This is where Christian existentialism differs from Sartre's existentialism which does not believe in the existence of God and His involvement in human affairs. In Sartre's existentialism, the presence of such obstacles, helplessness can give rise to anguish and despair and life can slip into meaninglessness and absurdity. Christian existentialism does not consider life meaningless and absurd in the face of obstacles or challenges.

This position has been argued by this author in another place (Obioha, 2012: 24-38). In the world besieged by war, violence, hunger, diseases and general



social disorder such as ours, there is no gainsaying the fact that we need courage to keep life going. And that this courage is founded on hope and faith in a loving, caring and faithful God. This is the succor that belief in God brings; and this is not an empty succor. Without such faith, life becomes absurd and meaningless in the face of disappointments, failures and difficulties. This perhaps explains why there are many cases of suicide in many secular (atheistic) societies than there are in religious societies like Africa. Despite the high level of suffering in Africa, most Africans do not take to suicide. They go through the sufferings and challenges of life with hope and faith that things will get better one day, and sooner or later things do get better. Miracle is a function of faith in God's intervention in the affairs of man. Africans or those who believe in miracles do receive miracles from God for their challenges. There are verifiable cases of miracles amongst Africans and indeed amongst those (anywhere) who believe in God's existence and God's involvement in man's affairs. This is the pragmatic benefit for belief and faith in God. Christian existentialism subscribes that life is therefore, not absurd and meaningless even in the midst of disappointments and difficulties.

### **Conclusion**

Human life is like a bed; the way you dress it determines the way you lay on it. One may say: life is 'garbage in garbage out'. The quality of the efforts you put into it determines the quality of what it delivers to you. This is one philosophy Christian existentialism shares with Sartre's existentialism. To this very end, their point of departure is the same. However, their *terminus ad quem* differs in that Christian existentialism recognizes and affirms the God – factor in human affairs when life throws up difficulties and challenges beyond man's control. This is a point which Sartre's existentialism vehemently opposes but not without untold implications. It is considered here that Sartre's existentialism makes life slip into meaninglessness and absurdity in the face of anguish and despair.

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