

A CRITIQUE OF EXISTENTIALIST PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION: TOWARDS A FORMATION OF A BALANCE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION FOR THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

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ABSTRACT

Existentialist philosophy of education, conceives of an education that revolves round the student. They see the goal of education as that of bringing out the uniqueness of all individuals. This paper appraised this conception of education and found out that these ideas if pursued and made practical will lead to dysfunctional effects in the African society. The paper therefore advocated a complementarity of child-centred and society-centred approach to education as the most appropriate for the society.

KEY WORDS: education, existentialist education, child-centred, africa

INTRODUCTION

Existentialism, though tracing its roots to the sophists is a modern philosophy which emerged in the 19th century, inspired by such thinkers as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Unlike other traditional philosophy, whose concern was on objective instances of truth, existentialism concern was with the subjective or personal aspect or instance of existence.

This work explores major themes of existentialist philosophy as well as the existentialist philosophy of education and gave a critique of it. The work believes that the existentialists got it right when they advocated an education that is tailored towards the enabling of the individual to find meaning in life. It also got it right when it seeks for an education that will bring out the unique talents and personalities of each individual. Their fight against the banking system of education is also commendable. However, in spite of these good points of existentialist philosophy of education, the work believes that practical application of this philosophy will work against national development, national unity, objective research and other issues.

I conclude by advocating a philosophy of education that is at once child-centred and society-centred. This we believe will enhance the development of the individual which is the main craving of the existentialist philosophy and also aid the society to meet its manpower requirement.

EXISTENTIALIST PHILOSOPHY

Existentialism is generally believed to be a trend or theme in philosophy rather than a particular doctrine or system. It is a philosophical system which emphasizes the importance of human experience and hold that man is responsible for his actions and choices. It is a “philosophy of ego, selfhood, subjectivity and individuality which rejects all rationalists and empiricists’ doctrines that assume that the universe is a determined, ordered and a designed system, intelligible to the reflective observer” (Enukoha et al 167). The sophists are believed to be the providers of the ancient foundation to the existentialist school of philosophy. The sophists brought down philosophy from the starry heavens to man and his existential realities. Their main preoccupation was how to make man overcome his existential problems to live a meaningful life on earth. Considering this, the sophist could rightly be said to be the first existentialists. However, modern existentialism began at the end of the 20th century with the work of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Existentialism is also linked to prominent thinkers like Sartre, Merleau-ponty, Camus, Marcel, Buber, Tillich and Jaspers.

Existentialism stresses the need to concern more with the existence of man that is with his emotion, feelings, hopes, desires, physical passions and overall presence as well as his participation in a constantly changing world. Man to the existentialists is the subject and not the object who owes nothing to nature except his existence. Thus, existentialist begins from man and not nature which is purposeless, meaningless and irrational – his existence is independent of God and society (Macquarrie 14). God, truth, knowledge, value systems and other so called objective realities to the existentialist are individual or subjective matters and the individual should decide them.

Existentialist holds the belief that man is the originator of all ideas. That is, he explores his own feelings, and relates all his ideas to life situation. They also hold the belief that the problem of being takes precedence over epistemology and logic. Thus, notions like contingency, anxiety, death, choice, freedom, responsibility, decision, love etc deserves more attention than more traditional themes like the one and the many problem, unity in diversity, problem of universals etc. The basic question that they argue should be the preoccupation of philosophers includes: who am I? Why I my here? Where am I going? What should I do? What should I believe? What should I choose? Etc.

Existentialist thought reflects the solitariness, alienation and angst which were the ethos of the life and times in which existentialism emerged. However, even though it emerged in a gloomy context of the World Wars. Existentialism is not merely a pathological outcome of a certain historic situation but goes beyond this to an optimism that is a result of deep reflection and meditations over human numerous predicaments. This purposeful movement from a sense of helplessness to the power of will is what existentialism craves for. The existentialist believes that for philosophy to be relevant to the human existence, it needs to be nothing than a way of life. This means that philosophy needs to do more than merely attempting to capture the essence of life through reason.

Existentialism is therefore more a way of philosophising than a school of philosophy. Thus, existentialists do not start with a common body of doctrines, though they have some common themes

like freedom, responsibility, guilt, authenticity, emotion, alienations, death and being et cetera. In spite of the commonness of the themes, all existentialists approach these themes in their own peculiar ways, which appears to be a weakness as Schneider observed “the diversity among them (the existentialists) testifies to the fact that the so-called existentialist movement has no unity of aim or of doctrine (Schneider 469).

The existentialists are more interested “in developing the affective side of man, his capacity to love, to appreciate, to respond emotionally to the world about him (Morris 255), but he does not suggest that this should be done at the cost of man’s reasoning. He only believes that the affective and emotive state of man should be the primary target of philosophy and philosophising. Thus, existentialist is “not an irrationalist in the sense of supporting his claims by appeal to mystical insight, ‘gut’ feeling, or other non-rational founts of knowledge” (Cooper 14). The existentialist focus on “the whole being rather than aspect or parts of it; they talk about the plight of man as well as his uniqueness; the focus is on the lived rather than on the conceptualized; the being is inseparable from the world rather than one adjusting to and being subordinate to the world or being the one who is appropriating the world to his desires; and the concern is with meaning or ‘how to be’ rather than with how or ‘what to have’. (Baniwal 19).

In summary the main themes common to all existentialists which will aid us in understanding existentialist philosophy of education include:

1. There is a general suspicion amongst existentialists of grand narratives or explanation of phenomenon that is purely grounded in the primacy of human reason, like is the case in positivist sciences or traditional metaphysics.
2. The existentialists do not believe in a one-directional perspective to knowledge rather they favour a multi-perspective model for knowledge. To them there are many ways to know the world.
3. They share in the belief that existence precedes essence. That is, we do not have an essence given before we existed. Rather we first had existence and then proceed to create our essence through free and autonomous choice. They believe that all choices are accompanied by responsibilities. Thus, freedom comes with responsibility.
4. They hold that all perception and intentional conscious actions, comes within a horizon or context, which indicates that the human is already a being – the world, and not apart from it, as is presented in dualistic philosophy.
5. They hold the belief that we experience, and philosophize through moods like, despair, anxiety, dread, forlornness, fear etc which reveals to a greater or lesser degree our alienation from the world, others and even ourselves (<http://dc.cod.edu/philosophypub/>).

EXISTENTIALIST PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

The existentialists see education as being grounded in the notion that the student and their unique possibilities and talents are paramount to the task of teaching. This implies that for the existentialist, the individual must be the focus of education. Education must be focused on the individual as a distinct and unique entity who lives, acts and feel in the world. Education should therefore foster self understanding, respect for the worth and dignity of the individual as well as self actualization. This according to Daley as quoted by Enuokoha means:

1. Education should concern with the development of individual awareness
2. It should prepare and give individuals the opportunity to make free choices.
3. It should be directed at the self to encourage self-knowledge.
4. It should develop and encourage a sense of individual responsibility.
5. It should arouse a sense of individual commitment (169).

For the existentialists, the educator should not be seen and should not pose as a bearer of assured values who is expected to fill the student head with these values, in a disciplinarian fashion; rather the educator should be free from the desire to dominate the child (Buber 112). Buber compares an educator to a doctor, and believes that like a doctor, the educator should not seek to dominate the child. A doctor does not approach the treatment of a patient with preconceived ideas of what the patient need; he must ask the patient what his problem is and treat him accordingly. In likewise too the educator ought to consider the uniqueness of each individual and educate him accordingly. An educator should help develop the character and personality of each student.

The existentialist believes that the educator must not interfere in the child's wholeness but should influence him towards maintaining this wholeness. They also believe that the educator must be spontaneous and wholly active and alive so as he will be able to communicate directly with the students. Education is here distinguished from propaganda; for whereas propaganda only influences the other person for exploitative purposes, education on the other hand, sees the child as a unique entity and thereby prepares him to fulfil an essential task that he ought to. Education therefore from this perspective enables the student to develop his own unique idea and relationship with truth, value, God etc and also help him to face the other person in the world with him better.

One aim of the existentialist philosophy of education according to Morris is to "let education be the discovery of responsibility! Let learning be the sharp and vivid awakening of the learner to the sense of being personally answerable for his own life (117). That is education should be able to equip the learner to find his way in life and thus live a better life. The learner they argue, ought to be equipped by education to find personal identity and meaning in this world that is devoid of meaning and purposefulness.

The existentialists believe that every child has certain particular instincts which shine forth during his lifetime. Education should enable these instincts to shine forth. Among the many instincts, Buber discusses two: the originator instinct and the communion instinct. The originator instinct according

to him is an autonomous instinct which makes the child desires a share in the becoming of things; it makes him want to be subject of this event of production (100). The originator instinct makes the child solitary, because it lead him to “sharing in an undertaking and to entering into mutuality” (Buber 193). The instinct that enables the child to relate with others is not the originator instinct but the instinct of communion. Education he therefore believes should be able to breakdown “the independent autonomy of the separated kingdom of the self and works toward constructing the world we hold in common” (Hederman 254).

The existentialists believe that education is a right of every one. This is vivid in Buber’s statement that “the child is a reality; education must become a reality” (Buber 99). Thus, if the child exists education must exist. Education for him only exists when it directly or indirectly has some bearings on the reality experienced by the child.

The existentialists hold the view that the educational curriculum should be stretched to encompass notions and ideas like; the world is unstable, absurd, without meaning and that life is an anxious one that stretches from our birth and inevitable death. Though these concepts are disturbing ones, the existentialists insist that there should be captured in the curriculum. This is because for them, education ought to inquire about life’s difficulties, tension and ambiguities. The existentialist therefore seeks to overcome the perceived injustice of a curriculum that embraces and privileges certain forms of knowing and learning above others. They kick against a product-process model of curriculum making, which in a large part determines the direction of the education in advance of student learning. They rather favour a process-product model of curriculum development; for this they believe would allow for the autonomous evolvment and development of the curriculum as the learning unfolds. Also, they assert that the curriculum must be such that enhances the productive capacities of the individual. The existentialists reject a standardized curriculum and an authoritarian or disciplinarian model for teaching, because pedagogy they hold must allow for the students’ development of his unique possibilities. An existentialist curriculum will contain diverse content as well as an array of diverse pedagogical methods which will necessarily include good opportunities for peer-initiated and peer-directed learning (<http://dc.cod.edu/philosophypub/>).

A CRITIQUE OF EXISTENTIALIST PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

An existentialist philosophy of education has a lot of beneficial aspect that when employed could reposition education in the world and especially in Africa. For instance, their idea that education must be tailored towards the enablement of the individual to find meaning in life is a point that finds support by many philosophers and scholars. The sophists saw this as their task and the task of educationists. Plato in his attempt to divide humans into classes also pre-empted the existentialist quest for an education that will bring out the unique talents and personalities of each individual. Plato specified different education for different classes of people which is akin to the agitation of the existentialist for a child-centred education. The existentialist fight against the banking system of education is also commendable. However, in spite of these good points of existentialist philosophy

of education, there are some negative aspects in this philosophy that could be dysfunctional to education delivery and quality if implemented; these include:

1. The existentialist theory could lead to disunity in a country. Education is believed to be a tool for national integration and unity. This integration and unity could be achieved by teaching a common curriculum that will foster in the students the consciousness of our common past and present existential situation as well as the future challenges. This consciousness will imbue in students the feeling of oneness and thereby promote unity. Also, education needs to expose the students to their culture, values and ideologies of their societies, in order that they may fit well into the society. It is when individual are able to integrate well in the society that peace and unity will ensue. By kicking against, a common curriculum and the teaching of standard values and truths, existentialism indirectly promotes anarchism which invariably leads to disunity. By promoting the uniqueness of individuals, existentialism kicks against common identity which has tended to differentiate societies and ethnic groups from others. To hold tenaciously to an existentialist philosophy of education is to go against all that work to foster unity like common identity, common spirit, communalism, common good and such other values.

2. The existentialist philosophy of education will hamper national and economic development. Education is used by countries as a tool to satisfy the manpower need of the county. This means that most countries see education as society-centred. This is the position of Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Jibril Aminu and others. To be society-centred means the school curriculum will need to reflect the needs of the society and therefore cannot be process-product as proposed by the existentialist. If the curriculum follows the process-product approach, that is, it is not produced beforehand but as the class progresses, the graduates produced from this curriculum may not fit into the requirement of the society. By emphasising child-centred education, the existentialist indirectly work against national development. National economic development presupposes effective utilization of natural resources; natural resources can only be effectively utilized if there are trained workers in all fields of life; for there to be trained workers the education must be society-centred, which means the curriculum must be product-process as against a process-product curriculum proposed by the existentialists. This means that education must aim to ingrain the students with the skills needed to satisfy the manpower need of the country. To do this effectively there must be a standardized curriculum which is against the ideas of the existentialist.

3. Existentialism will make educational research illegitimate. Every research aims at producing findings that are objective and can be generalized. Existentialism on the other hand kicks against objective truth and values. This means academic research will become subjective and not objective as it should be, which will be illegitimate. To make education child-centred, educational researches must be child-centred also, which means there must be made subjective to the individual. By kicking against all forms of grand narratives and objective truth, existentialist kicks against research as is known in the world, because research methods and findings need to be objective to be valid.

4. Existentialism will lead to a lack of sympathy and compassion on students who are not able to meet up academically. By putting existence before essence, which means consciousness precedes nature, it makes failure to excel academically solely a blame of the student and not his nature and nurture. If failure in academics is linked to a choice by the student, it means there will be no need to sympathize or be compassionate to a student who is not able to compete favourably in academics with his peers. The existentialists would see such a student to have failed to wilfully overcome his existential challenges to excel in academics like others, which means they should not be pitied but blamed. According to scientists some students perform poorly in school because of their nature, which means their low performance is not their choice and thus they are not responsible for it. To assume that consciousness shapes the essence is to deny this scientific assertion; it means a denial of different levels of IQs which determine educational performance. It means the nature of an individual and his environment does not affect an individual academic performance. It also means an individual should be blamed and not sympathized with for failing to excel academically. It is however, hard to convince all, that choosing could transcend nature, environment and family upbringing in determining a child's academic performance.

5. The dense and impenetrable technical philosophical language employed by philosophies of education when engrafting an existentialist philosophy of education make it difficult if not impossible to translate this philosophy into actual practice and experience of education. This is made very difficult since the existentialist (except Nietzsche and Heidegger) wrote almost nothing about formal education. What is presented as existentialist philosophies of education is merely a conscious attempt to apply the ideas of existentialism into education by philosophers of education. This is difficult especially when we consider the fact that almost all existentialist differ from the others as regards the doctrine of existentialism. To carve an existentialist philosophy of education from these diverse views is rather difficult; this has made this philosophy difficult to articulate coherently to the satisfaction of all stakeholders. It would have been different if the existentialist philosophers themselves wrote on education.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

Existentialism is a philosophy whose concern is on man and his existential situations. Its philosophy of education is child-centred, which means educational activities need to revolve around the student. This also means that the method of teaching need to favour the child; the curriculum need to be determined by talents and abilities of the students and not by the educators; the teachers need not pose as boss or as reservoirs of knowledge and the students as receptacles; the teacher need not dominate the students.

This grave concern of the existentialist about the students is commendable but could lead to disastrous effects if practically implemented especially in a less developed continent like Africa. Africa is in dire need of development and therefore requires an educational philosophy that will propel it to this direction. Child-centred philosophy of education as envisaged by the existentialists cannot be adequate for Africa, for it may not produce enough manpower needed to fill the divergent

needs of the country. Education we believe will fare better and catapult Africa higher to its developmental targets, if it is both society-centred and child-centred. These two major components must be fully considered and protected for education to be functional. Child-centred education alone will leave most of the manpower needs of the society unmet. Society-centred education alone on the other hand will leave the child unfulfilled. A complementary philosophy of education (child-centred and society-centred) will satisfy the needs of the student as well as that of the society.

In as much as we agree that a child-centred education is good, we also believe that an education that captures both (child-centred and society-centred) is better. This kind of education will develop the students' unique abilities on the one hand and also train them to satisfy the manpower needs of the society. In this way the individual and the society will be enhanced.

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