

**Existentialism and the African nature of man: Interrogating the concept of better human existence in Africa**

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**Abstract**

*Many scholars have considered the nature of man from diverse perspectives. Aristotle, for example, conceived man as both a rational and social being. The philosophical purpose of these considerations is to lead us to a better understanding of man to project humanity for a better existence. Existentialism and African philosophy also seek to achieve the same purpose through their distinctive approaches. The concepts of freedom, choice, individuality, and existence precede essence in existentialism are crucial to understanding human nature. On the other hand, African Conception of the nature of man is influenced by African worldview and understanding of human existence. Man in many African societies is perceived as instinctively spiritual, communal, deterministic, both emotional and rational. These features on a face value interpretation contradict the essential nature of man in existentialism. Sequel to the above, this paper seeks to interrogate the two branches of philosophy critically and analytically. The interrogation is intending to project humanity in Africa for a better existence. It is hoped that this comparative approach to Western and African existentialism and its recommendations will enhance an improved understanding of man and consequently help in improving the human condition in Africa.*

**Keywords:** Existentialism, African nature, Human Existence, philosophy

**Introduction.**

Human nature can be described as what it means to be human or humanity's natural characteristics and dispositions. It is about the feeling, thinking and actions of human beings. Discussion about human nature is germane to man's understanding, especially concerning his ability to live a meaningful life. Since this is the ultimate purpose of philosophy (to practically impact lives), philosophers have been interested in a more profound discovery of the nature of man. To Aristotle, for example, the nature of man distinguishes him from inanimate things and animals. This nature is important in the discovery of man's activities and functions.<sup>1</sup>Aristotle, as a result of the analysis of the human soul concluded that man is both rational and social.<sup>2</sup>Hegel in the same manner, sees man as rational.

<sup>1</sup>Samuel Enoch Stumpf, *Socrates to Sartre* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975), 100.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.



Cleary and Pigliucci avers that the knowledge of human nature is pertinent to life to the extent that it is impossible to construct a philosophy of life without it. This is so because the nature of man separate humanity from the rest of the animal world and a denial of it runs contrary to the history of philosophy and scientific discoveries.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, Plato opines that human nature consists of three constituents; the body, spirit and reason. The body represents human appetite, the spirit and reason are the sits of human personality and intellect, respectively.

The Judeo- Christian- Islam School view man essentially as the image of God. Many African culture share this religious view of man. Marxists on the other hand conceive man as labour. Man to them is a social, economic and political animal. To Freudal Psychoanalysts, man is deterministic as every event has a preceding cause. Skinnerian Behaviourists conceive that human nature is conditioned by man's environment.<sup>4</sup>

Existentialists, however, considered human nature from a unique and radical perspective. Existentialism is a philosophical project that seeks to achieve a better human condition first for the individual and then to the general masses; to achieve this, attempt is made by classical existentialists to understand the fundamental nature of man. Man in existentialism is essentially understood from the perspective of his existence. This is because existentialism takes human existence as the point of departure for philosophy. Human existence, for the existentialists, encompasses the totality of the individual such that what the individual does, feels, his basic inclinations, and associations are part and parcel of his existence. They argue that philosophy should consider factors and forces that assail the human being as its primary responsibility. Hence, human nature must be understood from this perspective.

Every culture has theories about the nature of man, and Africans are not exempted. Africans in their philosophy and worldview, perceive human nature in specific ways. Beyond the rational and social nature of man, Africans consider the affective, the intuitive, the irrational and the emotional part of man. It is possible in African thought to relate to phenomena through all these modes of thought.<sup>5</sup> Man, however, is considered in Africa as being in the Centre of the universe. Every aspect of the African worldview must ultimately be related to man and his existence. It, therefore, becomes imperative for Africans to consider the nature of the man who is at the Centre of the universe.<sup>6</sup>

The ultimate purpose of existentialism and African understanding of human nature is to seek the best possible world for humanity. While their approach may be different in some instances, there is no doubt that the two schools essentially desire a better human condition for man. This paper, therefore,

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<sup>3</sup> Skye C. Cleary and Massimo Pigliucci, Human Nature Matters. <https://aeon.co>

<sup>4</sup> Richard A. Richards, *The Species Problem: A philosophical Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 204

<sup>5</sup> C. Mamalu, *Foundation of African Thought* (London: Karmak House, 1990), 13.

<sup>6</sup> U. Onunwa, "The Individual and Community in African Traditional Religion & Society," *The Mankind Quarterly* 34, No. 3, (1994,): 225-260.

seeks to interrogate the two philosophical disciplines. First, it establishes possible areas of similarities and differences. Second, it does an experiential critique of the two philosophies, seeks the best combination that projects a qualitative human existence in Africa, and lastly, it recommends possible ways to attain a better human condition in Africa.

### **Nature of Man in Existentialism.**

The focus of philosophy has always been to impact humanity. Its fundamental responsibility is to reflect on life and human existence. However, the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the development of a brand of philosophy that focused on the problem of human existence. This is the field of existentialism. Scholars that belong to this kind of philosophy including but are not limited to; Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre and many others. Though they are not entirely united in their approach to the problem of human existence, they agree on some basic themes or tenets of the discipline. These themes constitute their understanding of human nature and will be the focus of this section of the paper. 'Existence precedes essence' is a central proposition of existentialism, and it describes a major fundamental characteristic of man. It means that there is no essence of a human being that would somehow precede him and determine his essence. This is contrary to the thoughts of essentialists like Plato and Aristotle, who hold the view that everything has an essence that exists before birth. To them, part of what it is to be a good human is to adhere to one's essence. In this regard, one's essence gives one a purpose.<sup>7</sup>

Existentialism, in opposition to the above, asserts that existence that precedes essence has a fundamental feature of humanity. Man first exists and then defines himself. He cannot be said to be anything before and outside his existence. The process is that man first exists, then encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards.<sup>8</sup> The implication is that man is not a predetermined being. He is not determined by anything outside his existence, not even any form of nature. No nature is affixed to man. His nature is continually developing according to the goals he set for himself. He is what he makes himself. He cannot be seen from a fatalistic point of view. No one is born with an innate personality, but everyone becomes who they are by the goals they pursue and the value they adopt. For the purpose of this discussion, the *dictum* can be put in another way to mean 'existence precedes nature' or 'existence supersedes nature'. In the words of Agbakoba, it is human nurtured nature as each individual is responsible for creating his/her brand of nature.

Another implication is that man is a continuous and not a complete project. He can be something today and another tomorrow. Every individual has a future depending on what he/she desires for himself/herself. This theme was first propounded by Jean Paul Sartre and adopted by many other existentialists.

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<sup>7</sup>Existentialism: Crash Course Philosophy.

<https://m.yoruba.com/watch?y=YaDyRDLMKHS>.

<sup>8</sup>Thomas Flynn, *Existentialism: A very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 111.

Another point in existentialism discussion about human nature is that humanity is foremost about the individual and not the community. Man, in the context of existentialism, refers to an individual who is self-transcending, a conscious being who always projects into the future. He is unique; he has his own irreversible history, and he is not replaceable in society. He also has an interiority that is impenetrable but can only be accessed by him.<sup>9</sup>

The individual, according to Sartre, is never exhausted by any of his phenomenal aspects. There is no particular perspective that reveals the entire character or nature of man. This is why "*Being-for-itself*" is different from "being-in-itself." *Being-in-itself* does not have the consciousness that transcends itself.<sup>10</sup> "A stone is a stone, it is what it is and in being just what it is no more no less."<sup>11</sup> It is fixed complete and without consciousness. On the contrary, "*Being-for-itself*" is the being of the individual which has potentiality and is transcendent. It can become what it is not; it is perpetually beyond itself. It is, therefore, incomplete, fluid, indeterminate, and it corresponds to the being of human consciousness. It is this process that essentially determines the nature of the individual not birth, the environment or any pre-existence negotiation or condition. It is an individual-centred orientation, and it is anti-social in outlook.

The implication is that the individual must continue to be free to project into the future. He/she has the capacity to take a new course at any point in time. It also implies that a man's character could be unpredictable depending on his choice of project. Lastly, the individual must be an *actor*, not a spectator, in the language of Soren Kierkegaard. To him, existence must refer to quality in the individual, namely, their conscious participation in actions. Only a person engaged in conscious activities of will and choice can be truly said to exist. Existentialism also maintains that the existence of the individual necessarily implies the existence of others, for the individual cannot exist without others. This means that man is not only a being in the world but also a being with others. Existentialists therefore stress the social nature of man as a being with others while maintaining man's individuality, singularity and uniqueness.<sup>12</sup> This implies that the individual should not allow himself/herself to be lost in the crowd.

As a result, existentialism asserts freedom as a necessary feature of the human being. This freedom is unfettered and unrestrained. Freedom is the structure of man's being and a basic condition of human existence. An attempt to prove that man is free is like an attempt to prove that man exists. Freedom is an integral part of existence. The individual does not acquire freedom because it is identical to human existence.<sup>13</sup> Sartre opines that freedom is fundamental to man and not a derivate of anything. Man came to the world to be free. Freedom

<sup>9</sup>JimohAnslem, *An Introduction to existentialism, Phenomenology and Hermeneutics* (Ibadan: Ebony Books, 2014), 40.

<sup>10</sup>B. Agidigbi, *Issues and Themes in existential Philosophy* (Benin City: Skylights points, 2006), 65.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid, 66.

<sup>12</sup> John Macquarrie, "Existentialism," *Encyclopedia of Religion* (San Francisco: Thompson Gue, 2005), 2924.

<sup>13</sup>JospehOmoregbe, *A Simplified History of Western Philosophy* (Lagos: Joja Education Research and Publishers Limited, 1993), 43.

is, therefore, natural to man, and it cannot be in excess.<sup>14</sup> If there is anything that man is born with, it is the capability to be free. The freedom of man is unrestricted, and there is no universal moral law that determines how he should act. However, Sartre is not just interested in man being free for the sake of freedom. The individual must be free of self-fastened shackles in order to attain his/her unlimited potentials.<sup>15</sup> Freedom is, therefore, meaningless if it cannot assist man to become the best that he can be. Freedom for man is however tied to choice. It is the freedom to choose. This means that freedom and choice are inseparable. Choice is the concrete actualization of freedom. Human existence is said to be authentic when the individual freely chooses who and what he or she becomes. Freedom, however, compels the individual to assume responsibility for his/her life and actions.<sup>16</sup>

Another imperative point of discussion in the Existentialism view of human nature is the role of God in human existence. Existentialists are however divided in this regard. While Kierkegaard holds a strong view that man is instinctively religious, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre opine that God does not have any responsibility in human nature. To Kierkegaard, human existence is wasteful without God. To him, Christian faith is not a matter of regurgitating church dogma. It is a matter of individual subjective passion. Faith is the most important task to be achieved by a human being because it is only on the basis of faith that an individual has a chance to become a true self.<sup>17</sup> He also conceives that religion is not characterized by objective truths (factual information about the world) but rather subjective truths (passion & commitment). Religion is made meaningful by a passionate commitment to what the individual believes and what he or she wants out of life, regardless of whether it can be rationally and mathematically described or not. Reason to him undermines faith and can never justify it. To believe in God is a matter of choice and not an intellectual exercise.<sup>18</sup> Essential or true self is only made possible by religious commitment.

Sartre's atheism, on the other hand, is the foundation of his theory of man. His existentialism rests on the notion that the non-existence of God does not have any negative effect on human values. Without God, man can attain progress, success, honesty, dignity, and qualitative existence.<sup>19</sup> Men do not need God to exhibit good nature. His atheism also suggests that the non-existence of God makes everything permissible. Since God does not exist, man becomes the only being that is unrestrictedly free and whose existence comes before his essence. Nietzsche's atheism is demonstrated in his two concepts of *Master* and *Slave Morality*. He pronounced God dead in *Master morality* and declared man to be God. Man took over the place of God and rejected the values of *slave morality*.

<sup>14</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on phenomenological ontology* (London: Methuen and Co., 1972), 440.

<sup>15</sup>Wilfrid Desan, *The Tragic Finale: An essay on the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: Herper Touch Books, 200), 43.

<sup>16</sup>Huber Black, *Handbook of Educational Philosophy* (Tennessee: Clevard, 2002), 326.

<sup>17</sup>Clare Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming Movements and Positions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 201.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Trans. Carol Macomber, ed. John Kuka. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 220.

The death of God is the freedom of man. Man is free to act in place of God. The individual now becomes a *superman* who is unrestrictedly free.<sup>20</sup> This position is a rejection of the idea of man as instinctively religious.

Essentially, existentialism is a theory of action. Man is born to be active and not passive. He must be active by taking control of his own destiny. Other important nature of man to existentialists are facticity and death. Facticity refers to the limiting factors of human existence. It has to do with the awareness of man's finitude, his inability to know beyond what he can know. This is the limiting factor of human existence. Death reveals the authentic possibilities of human existence. The concern of existentialists about death is not about the way it comes but about the finitude of existence. The truth is that existence will end.<sup>21</sup>

### African Nature of Man

The people of Africa, like other tribes of the world, have the quest to unravel the nature of man. The beginning point of their discussion about human nature is the origin of man. Most tribes of Africa hold the view that man has a pre-existence that predates his actual existence and also affects his essence and nature. The origin of man also has to do with the creation of man. God is seen as the creator and sustainer of man and the universe.<sup>22</sup> Man's nature cannot be discussed outside God because human nature is derived from God. However, Africans believe that the Supreme Being acts through a host of lesser gods in the creation of man. The gods are like intermediaries between God and man and they are venerated.<sup>23</sup> Each of these deities exemplifies an authority associated with a natural or cultural phenomenon.

In African worldview, nothing (human nature inclusive) happens and is discussed without the spiritual dimension. It is believed that every aspect of life is controlled by a particular spirit. Whatever happens in life is only a shadow of what has been settled in the spirit realm.<sup>24</sup> Mbiti opines that all African people believe in God. It is an assumption that needs no query.<sup>25</sup> Opoku submits that God in the African religion is the creator of gods, men and the universe.<sup>26</sup> In essence, human nature in Africa cannot be detached from God. Man is naturally drawn to God, and religion serves as a standard for morality and all other values needed for a better human condition. There are two important implications of the Africans' belief about God and His relationship with human nature. The first is that the involvement of God in the creation of man and the general spirituality

<sup>20</sup>P. Strike, *Philosophy: 100 Essential Thinkers* (London: Arthurns Publishing Ltd, 2012), 206.

<sup>21</sup>Howard Hong and Edna Hong, "Subjectivity/Objectivity", Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers 4 Indiana University Press, (1975) : 712-13.

<sup>22</sup>S. A. Abioye, *Basic Text on West African Traditional religion for Higher Education* (Ilorin: Ray-Hig International Ent. 2010), 31.

<sup>23</sup>Tom Michi, *Masquerade as Social Control Among Igala* (Portharcourt: Portharcour University Press, 1980), 77.

<sup>24</sup>K. A. Opoku, *West Africa International Religion* (Accra: PEP International Private Limited, 1978), 5.

<sup>25</sup>John Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Oxford: Heineman international, 1975), 40.

<sup>26</sup>Opoku, 5.

portrayed in the African worldview contradicts the atheistic stand of Sartre and Nietzsche about human existence and nature. The second is that the Africans' belief in God challenges Western existentialism dictum of 'existence precedes essence'. Things that happen in the spirit realm have an impact on man's real existence. Man has a spiritual encounter that predates his real existence.

We can, therefore, say that the pre-existence dimension is crucial to Africans' conception of human nature. The Africans' view of man as it relates to human existence predates his concrete personal existence. The concept of *Ori* and human destiny among the Yoruba of Nigeria, which is similar in thought to the *Akan* of Ghana's concept of personhood, suggests that the whatness of an individual did not start at the point of his/her existence, rather it is a phenomenon that can be traced to his/her pre-existence.<sup>27</sup>

According to Yoruba traditions, *Oloduamare* (the Supreme Being) creates the physical body but commissioned *Ajala* (a potter) to be in charge of moulding *Ori* (head) which signifies essence. After *Olodumare* has finished the creation of the human body, an individual will go to *Ajala* to pick his/her *Ori*. This *Ori* picked by an individual determines what the person becomes in life.<sup>28</sup> This reflects that the human essence has been given an individual prior to his/her existence. This suggests that there are aspects of human nature that are affixed from the pre-existence state. This is also contrary to the belief in existentialism that nothing is natural to the individual.

Many scholars have, on the strength of the above Yoruba ontological argument concluded that human destiny in Africa is not alterable, that is, a deterministic interpretation of the concept of human destiny. Some have also called for a re-interpretation of Sartre's dictum to be "Essence precedes Existence instead of "Existence Precedes Essence." The above interpretations have also led some to conclude that the individual in Africa is not free since he/she is limited to the essence chosen from his or her pre-existence.

The above conclusion and interpretation is, however, a misunderstanding of the interlocking relationships of various components that build up the human personality in African culture. There is, therefore the need to present the right interpretation of African concept of destiny in relation with other African values that adequately interpret human nature. The researcher argues in the next part of the paper that the concept of human pre-existence and destiny in Africa does not necessitate a re-interpretation of Sartre's dictum neither is it an impediment to human freedom. Destiny in African ontology is soft deterministic and not hard deterministic.

Another feature of man evident in the African worldview is that man is a social being. Hence, human nature is not only rooted in God and pre-existence state but also in the reality of others in the society in particular and the world at

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<sup>27</sup>Adeoye, 103.

<sup>28</sup>Oladele Abiodun Balogun, "The Concept of *Ori* and Human Destiny in Traditional Yoruba Thought: A Soft Deterministic Interpretation," *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 16 (i)(2007):118.

large. Human nature must necessarily be discussed in relation to others. This is similar to Plato and Aristotle's study who holds that man is a social being. This, however, contradicts the individualistic perception of man in existentialism. African culture emphasizes individual responsibility and contributions to the society. This is because African perception of human nature is highly social. It places great emphasis on social responsibility. The individual's responsibility to the society is higher in the African context. This responsibility includes the effort to ensure others act according to acceptable standards and values. This is also why the culture of the people of Africa emphasizes moral training. Freedom, in this context, is not unfettered and unrestrained.

The concept of Ubuntu from South and East Africa best encapsulates the idea of African "we" philosophy. The concept shows how the being of an African person is not only embedded in the community but also in the universe as a whole. It is the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity. With *Ubuntu*, a member of a family or a village who is in great existential difficulty will not be left alone. It speaks particularly about the fact that no individual can exist as a human being in isolation.<sup>29</sup> It speaks about our interconnectedness.

### Interrogation for Better Human Existence in Africa

The task of this section of the paper is to interrogate existentialism and African perception of human nature in a way that helps us have a better understanding of the two perspectives but, most importantly, helps us discover the best way to project a better human existence in Africa. The difference between the two schools of thought seems obvious, but there are similarities that our interrogation will help to unveil. So, how are the two approaches similar?

A clear similarity despite the obvious differences is that both existentialism and African perception of man intended to achieve the same goal. First, it is for a better understanding of man. The two branches of philosophy sought to understand man in relation to other things in the universe. Second, the two schools of thought sought such understanding not just for the sake of knowledge but to discover how best to project man for a better existence. We also need to point out that their differences in terms of the religious nature of man are not total. Like the African worldview of man, existentialist like Kierkegaard holds the view that man is instinctively religious. Lastly, though existentialism may be anti-social, it recognises the presence of others. Existentialists aver that the individual is not alone in the world, and he or she must make decisions with the consciousness of others. Though the individual must be free to choose and decide, such a decision must be taken with the consciousness of taking it on behalf of others; this is responsibility, according to Sartre.

The next task of this paper is to interrogate the two approaches using their central themes about human nature. Three theme combinations will be

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<sup>29</sup><http://www.usa.blogspot.be/2012/01/Ubuntu-brief-meaning-of-african-world.html>. Retrieved on 13/3/2015.

interrogated, and they are; atheism versus theism theme, 'existence precedes essence' versus pre-existence notion, and individualism versus communalism.

### Atheism versus Theism

Their conception of man in relationship to God and spirituality is not that straightforward. While African conception asserts that spirituality cannot be detached from human nature, existentialists are divided in this regard. A single conclusion about the role of God cannot be reached in discussing existentialism in general. However, the majority of classical existentialists are atheistic in their approach to human nature. We can, however, draw values that are relevant for better human existence from the two approaches.

Africans, see man as instinctively religious. Man cannot be detached from his God. Mbiti avers in this regard that "it is tough for a person to be detached from his/her religion for to do so is to be served from his root, foundation, his context of security, his kingship and the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence."<sup>30</sup> God is understood in Africa as the root of human existence. Hence, he is inherently religious. Atheistic existentialists like Sartre and Nietzsche challenged this African thought about human nature. To them, God is not an important factor in human existence. Nietzsche in fact, pronounced God dead and argued for a *superman* that embodies *Master mortality*. Sartre, on his own part, argues that progress, prosperity, honesty and better human existence are best achievable without God.

The greatest concern for the African continent is that there are individuals and nations of the world that are atheistic but have better human existence than African individuals and society. Despite African religiosity, evils such as corruption, terrorism, ritual killings, and leaders' insensitivity still pervade the whole continent. Despite African religiosity, discussion about hope for humanity is most times on the negative. Africa still struggles with issues of the high rate of poverty, environmental degradation, terrible infrastructural facilities and social amenities, just to mention but a few. It should be noted that all these problems are human inflicted. It is then imperative to ask the following questions; why are many Africans' still backward despite our religiosity? Why are countries that are not religious making better human progress? What is the benefit of the African claim that man is inherently religious? What values does the claim of God have for human existence? Can we conclude that God is not needed for Africa to make tangible existential progress?

To put it straight, the God factor has had little impact on human existence in Africa. To conclude that God is not needed in Africa on the strength of the above will be a fallacy of hasty conclusion. The real question to be considered is; have Africans translated religious values to existential advantage? The answer is in the negative. Religious values such as honesty, sincerity, selflessness, sacrificial living, and love for others, though they have a positive effects on human lives, they are in short supply among religious practitioners in Africa. Therefore, the

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<sup>30</sup>John S. Mbiti, *African Religion and philosophy* (Great Britain: Morrison and Dribb Ltd, 1963), 29.

real issue remains the practicality of religions and how God factor can be made practical for better human existence.

The need for religions to have practical and positive effects on people's lives cannot be underestimated. The situation today is the springing up of many religious centres with less godliness. In many parts of Africa, the situation is that the more religious centres we have, the more the level of evil and immorality in the system. Many adherents of religions in contemporary Africa are involved in large scale corruption, abuse of leadership positions and similar practices that dehumanize humanity. This was not the case in the Africa of yesteryears. Religion in Africa used to be the basis for judging individual morality. The fear of God, the deities and ancestors, was used to make people honest, sincere and avoid every form of evil. Corruption and leaders' insensitivity was for example, unpopular in the Africa in those days. Many have attributed the negative change in Africa morality to modernization propelled by westernisation. Whatever the cause may be, the truth is that African religions have helped in curtailing evil in the past.

For religion to have a positive impact on humanity, Kolawole avers that there should be a balance between the spiritual and the physical dimensions of life. There is a need for people to relate better to their environment and the physical world. African religion should promote responsible stewardship of God's resources emphasizing creature's care rather than reckless usage of the earth's resources.<sup>31</sup> He also stresses out the need to translate the dominant religiosity to true spirituality characterized by godliness.

Religion in Africa, among other things, should promote sound moral standards since God in African understanding is responsible for moral order. The failure of religions in Africa to promote moral standards is, therefore, an aberration, and it has a direct relationship with negative human existence. The issue of unbridled corruption in most parts of Africa is largely a moral issue, and its existential implications are enormous. Corruption breeds poverty, poor infrastructural facilities and economic stagnation which in turn lead to political instability, conflict and ethic crisis. It is certain that no meaningful development can take place where corruption is institutionalised.

Hence, this paper affirms that the God factor is not the reason for the backwardness of many African nations but the failure of the people to translate religious values to existential advantage. Putting religious values into action can in fact, help Africans attain qualitative human existence.

#### **'Existence Precedes Essence' Versus Pre-existence Notion.**

Another area of this study that requires interrogation is the *dictum* 'existence precedes essence' in relation to Africans' belief in the pre-existence of humanity. Does the pre-existence notion connote a hard deterministic interpretation of the concept of destiny? Do Africans' belief in the pre-existence

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<sup>31</sup>Simon A. Kolawole, "Existentialism and the African Challenge," International Journal of Innovative Development and Policy Studies 5 no, 2, (2017). 34

of man requires a re-interpretation of this dictum to mean 'essence precedes essence'? Does the pre-existence notion limit individual freedom to transcend self? These are crucial questions we will seek to provide answers to.

A hard deterministic interpretation of the African notion of destiny and pre-existence of Man is based on a misunderstanding or misconception of the thorny issues surrounding the African conception of a person. Pre-existence notion must be interpreted with other relevant concepts in African culture in order to have the best interpretation. These include concepts like character, sacrifice and hard work. Our interrogation must, therefore, examine some of these thorny issues and concepts. It is held in many African cultures that powerful spiritual human forces can alter destiny chosen in the pre-existence of any individual. These are people who can tap into the divine reality for spiritual power. They are referred to as *Omoaraye* (powerful human beings) in Yoruba culture. These include witches, secret cults with a bias towards evil practices or machinations. These powerful spiritual beings can render ineffective whatever future the individual has picked in his or her pre-existence state.<sup>32</sup> In other words, some African cultures hold the view that pre-existence interactions are not cast in iron

Evidence also abound in African culture, where a person's destiny is altered for another person through sacrifices. A popular concept in Yoruba culture of Nigeria is *Akosejaye*, where the future or destiny of someone is revealed through divination. Actions are taken in some instances to swap an individual's destiny for another with the aim of changing that person's bad destiny to a good one. Additionally, many African cultures believe that a person's character is capable of changing whatever future picked in the pre-existence state. A person whose character is bad has already spoilt his or her happy destiny. A good destiny unsupported by good character is perceived in many African cultures as worthless. Therefore, an individual with bad character should not expect an automatic fulfillment of good destiny. Many African cultures agree with Aristotle's submission that virtues are qualities that are necessary for the development of man as a social being.<sup>33</sup> Being cannot be independently explained in many African societies without character. Character in Africa transcends existentialists understanding of the human person in that it describes a more cultured and nurtured individual and also guarantees better societal preservation.

From all the above, it is obvious that whatever happens in the pre-existence of an individual from the culture of the people of Africa is not enough in the realization of his or her destiny. Human efforts, as existentialists' claim are also very crucial in African understanding of human success. A literal and face-value interpretation of African ontology may suggest in some senses that an individual's pre-existence has an overriding determination of whatever a man will be in life. However, a deep consideration of other concepts and values in the African interpretation of human essence suggests otherwise. Individuals have

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<sup>32</sup>Bolaji Idowu, *Eledumare: God in Yoruba belief* (Lagos: Longman Nigeria Plc, 1996), 192.

<sup>33</sup>Bosede Adebawale & Folake Onayemi, "Aristotle's Human Virtue and Yoruba Worldview of Omoluabi: An Ethical Interpretation"

the responsibility to take positive action in the realization of their destinies. Like existentialism, African ontology is also a theory of action.

Therefore, African ontology is soft deterministic, and there is no need for a reinterpretation of existentialism dictum of “existence precedes essence” to “essence precedes existence”. Essence in Africa is determined by both situations of pre-existence and actual existence. The individual may have chosen a portion in his or her pre-existence, the actualization of this portion when one gets to the world is self-deterministic. This is more so since the individual is oblivious of whatever transaction he/she has entered in his/her pre-existence state. He or she is left with no other choice than to freely determine his or her destiny with positive action while on earth. We can also conclude on the strength of the above argument that African pre-existence notion does not limit the freedom of the individual to transcend self. The individual is free to achieve potential through hard work, good character, and good spiritual and interpersonal relationships. For if destiny is determined, where is the place of freedom and choice? What is the justification for giving punishment for wrong doing? What is the need for human struggle and handwork?

It is, therefore, imperative for African people to work towards a comprehensive understanding of the African culture. The epistemological danger of a bad understanding of a people's culture is a weak philosophy which in turn retards development. Africans must consciously promote their cultures, especially those that are critical to human development.

### **Individualism versus Communalism**

The seeming contradiction between the concept of the individual in existentialism and the society in African ontology also requires interrogation. The individual is the most important being in existentialism. He or she is rated above the crowd. African culture and philosophy, on the other hand, put a heavy responsibility on society when they talk about individual existence. How then should we juxtapose the two seemingly different approaches? It is important to point out that existentialism through it heavily emphasizes the individual in its argument; it at the same time recognises the presence of others. Sartre in fact, avers that no man chooses for himself alone without consideration of the implication of his choice on others what is important for us is how to strike a balance between the individual-centred approach of existentialism and the society centred approach of the African culture.

Temisanrem Ebijuwa provides a template that can be used to achieve the desired balance. The core of his argument is that excessive individualism and over-stretched communalism are problematic to the progress of any society.<sup>34</sup> He avers that the individual is not an atomic and self-sufficient being that does not need society to realize his or her goals. The individual can, therefore, not be described in isolation from the life goals and values orientations that determine

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<sup>34</sup>Temisanren Ebijuwa, “*The Concept of Ori and human destiny: An Analysis of Oluwale’s Fatalistic Interpretation*,” Dershana International, An International Quarterly of Philosophy, Psychology, Physical Research, Religion Mysticism and Sociology 37, No.1, (1997): 62.

him.<sup>35</sup> It is in fact, the community that makes available what is necessary for the realization of individual potentials and for living a worthy life.

It is, therefore, futile to conceive the self as a pre-social being since the individual acquires his or her identity from inter subjectivity of cultural socialization and also draws the picture of himself or herself from the cultural store of inter-subjectivity. This is because the inter-subjectivity shared values serve as the mechanism for the control of human behaviour and also give the individual a set of definitions of himself or herself and of others. Hence, the identity of the individual cannot be detached from the cultural store of inter-subjectively shared value orientation.<sup>36</sup>

It is, however, counterproductive for the community argument of the African culture to be pushed to the extent of it being an obstacle to the ability of the individual to be innovative, initiate a new course of action, and be autonomous. By autonomy, we mean the freedom of the individual to pursue personal aspirations and choose his or her own goals for the purpose of achieving self-realisation. The responsibility of the community is to create an enabling environment for the individual self-realisation.

The way forward, according to Ebijuwa is to see the relationship between the individual and the community as complementary and not competitive. There should be no conflict between the individual and society. It is possible for the individual to be connected with the society, contribute his or her quota to the common good and still maintain his or her identity<sup>35</sup>. The ideal human community is the one that respects individual freedom for personal aspiration and at the same time encourages the individual to see the common good as the fundamental goal of everyone. This model is beneficial for better human existence in Africa.

This study, therefore, calls the attention of African governments to initiate policies that will assist individuals in developing their personal potentials. This is the key to African development as it directly related to the evolution of economic, scientific, and technological innovations in the continent. Many developmental initiatives of the developed world are the product of the ability of certain individuals to stand out of the crowd and also transcend themselves. For Africa to develop and improve the quality of human existence, there must be a deliberate intention by individuals to positively activate their freedom and contribute to the development of humanity. African countries must also be willing to free their people from any form of chain that limits their capacity to achieve projects that can improve the quality of human existence in the continent.

#### Conclusion

We have so far isolated issues in human nature from existentialism and African culture. The two philosophical schools of thought with different views of human

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<sup>35</sup>David E. Robert, *Existentialism and Religion Belief* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 68

<sup>36</sup>Temisanren Ebijuwa, "Libertarianism, Self-detachment, and Shared Values" *Ela Journals of African Studies* 7&8, (2000): 60.

nature can, however, be said to be complementary if properly interpreted. A good balance of the two approaches will definitely be productive for good human existence in Africa. What this paper has presented can be said to be a social critique of African existentialism. It is an attempt to isolate relevant issues from Western existentialism that can benefit human existence in Africa. African culture and philosophy are good and productive but may not be sufficient to give man the best of existence. While the God factor is an important factor in the African nature of man, existentialists are not united in this regard. The God factor in Africa has, however, not impacted sufficiently on human existence within the continent. Though it is an important aspect of the African culture with values that can help to improve human development, its operation has been altered overtime by the practitioners to the extent that it has become almost ignorable for qualitative human existence.

For religions in the continent to have existential impacts on the people, this paper recommends that religion in Africa should promote high moral standards and other existential values in the various religions.. There is an urgent need for religious practitioners in Africa to be practical by imbibing the virtues of the various religions. Religious practitioners should translate the words, spirit and intention of their religions to practicality. It is by doing this that Africa can overcome certain evils that are detrimental to qualitative human existence. In the same vein, Africa should seek to strike a balance between the spiritual and physical dimensions of life.

The 'existence precedes essence' *dictum* of existentialism has been held by some scholars to have contradicted African ontology. Consequently, they argued for a re-interpretation of it *dictum* to mean 'essence precedes existence'. But this is only a literal and face-value interpretation of African ontology. The African ontology is not fatalistic, as argued in some quarters. There is no sharp difference between the practical outcome of existentialists' concept of being and that of the Africans. The religious and the pre-existence dimensions in African ontologies do not negate the power and the will of the individual to transcend himself or herself. Actually, the pre-existence stand of the African people ultimately slip into individualism.

This paper on the basis of the above argument, recommends that African philosophy should encourage and commit itself to the right interpretation of African culture, values and norms. Our philosophical investigation must be deep, intelligent, foundational, factual, and integral. Also, government and philosophy should educate people on the values of individual transcendence embedded in African culture. This can be included in the school's curriculum starting from elementary school. It is also critical for African culture to abandon any of its aspects that limits individual freedom for self-transcendence, like gender discrimination.

The individualistic nature of man in existentialism is a direct contradiction of the communal and social nature of man in an African context. While this paper stands by the virtues that the African social nature of man presents, it at the same time calls for a good balance between it and the individualistic notion in existentialism by appropriating and inculcating some of the values of existentialism good for human development into African social system. The

African system must consciously promote the desire of the individual to make a positive impact in society. Anything that suppresses individual potential is not productive for human existence. This is one of the ways Africans can have qualitative human existence.

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