

A Critical Articulation of the Existentialists' Conceptions of Evil and Human Suffering

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Abstract

Evil and the phenomenon of suffering have been discussed from various perspectives such as the logical, evidential, Manichean, Stoic, Buddhist, and Epicurean. However, the articulation of existentialists' perspectives on the problem of evil and suffering have not been given a serious attention. Meanwhile, various existentialists have one or two things to, which may not be immediately obvious, to say about evil and the phenomenon of suffering because evil and suffering are existential problems in that they have their manifestation in the concrete existence of human beings in the world. That is why G. A. Oshitelu contends that the problem of evil is purely an existential question. However, while recognising this, he also fails to demonstrate how this is the case. We attempt, therefore, against this background, to articulate what might be considered as the existentialists' conceptions of evil and suffering using the method of critical analysis. Some of the existentialists whose views are analyzed here include: Soren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger and Albert Camus. This is necessary in order to further shed scholarly light on another perspective on the problem of evil which, till date, remains an unresolved problem in metaphysics, philosophy of religion and theology.

Keywords: Evil, Suffering, Reality, Existentialists, Existentialism, Human Existence.

Introduction

Evil and suffering are incontrovertibly real in the world and scholarly discourses on them are yet to be finally laid to rest. In this paper, the two shall be addressed because they constitute a fundamental hindrance to human happiness. In addition, they are galvanizing factors to the feeling of meaninglessness of human existence. Accordingly, they constitute a big obstacle to the endeavour and aspirations of human beings for self-definition, fulfillment, freedom, and authenticity, thereby frustrating the effort of human beings to make their existence meaningful.ⁱ The urge to make existence meaningful is a cogent concern of existentialism as an intellectual movement. This very concern becomes necessary because human existence is characterized by uncertainty and incomprehensible predicaments which are both bewildering and obstructive to human happiness. Hence, the need to understand the defining situations of human existence and ease their existential tensions become an important issue for the existentialists. Accordingly, the reality of evil and suffering in existence is an urgent issue of high existentialist concern. We shall therefore analyze the views of the existentialists in order to articulate their conceptions of evil and suffering and how, in their views, evil and suffering serve as precipitating factors to the meaninglessness of human existence.

It is, however, important to clarify that existentialists do not have a unanimous conception of evil and suffering due to the reason that they belong to different ideological camps on the

meaning and subject-matter of existentialism itself.ⁱⁱ In addition, some of them are theists while some are atheists. Nonetheless, the problem of evil in the world serves as an underlining or galvanizing factor to such existentialist themes as anguish, suicide, death, absurdity, nothingness, and so on. Analysing these themes will provide us with the needed illumination into the existential understanding of the problem of evil and how human happiness can be ensured despite their seemingly hopeless existential conditions. This accords in a reasonable degree with the submission of Monday Igbafe that “existential issues are best understood as themes of existentialism.”ⁱⁱⁱ

These themes, however, cannot be taken for granted as ultimate representatives of existential issues in their raw or naked senses unless they are analysed, discussed, evaluated and interpreted in line with, or in relation to practical human existential circumstances and their experiences in the world. The implication of this is that existentialist themes can be employed to analyse several issues or problems resulting from human existence. It is against this background that We set out to articulate the existentialists’ understanding of the problem of evil and their prescriptions on how human beings can suppress evil thereby making their existence meaningful.

Historical Backdrop and Preoccupations of Existentialism

Existentialism, as an intellectual tradition, developed in the nineteenth century along with the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. However, it is different from Husserl’s Phenomenology. While phenomenology recommends that we explore phenomena more subjectively from within our human experience, existentialism adopts the subjective approach of phenomenology and further develops it as an instrument that can be used to investigate into the practical issues of human experience such as making choices and personal commitments.^{iv} Accordingly, the existentialists find the phenomenological method useful in the study of man and his situations. That is why Sartre remarks that “the phenomenologists have plunge man back into the world; they have given full measure to man’s agonies and sufferings, and also to his rebellion.”^v

Nevertheless, the issue that marks the point of departure between the existentialists and the phenomenologists is the transcendence of the ego in Husserl’s philosophy. In fact, Olatunji Oyeshile contends that what led directly to existentialism was the rejection of the transcendental ego and the return to descriptive phenomenology.^{vi} The transcendental ego takes consciousness out of the observable situations surrounding human existence to the unobservable level of abstraction. Nevertheless, existentialism prioritizes human practical circumstances over abstract contemplation. Hence, it focuses on such things as making choices, personal commitments and responsibility, essence and existence, death, absurdity, anguish, freedom authenticity and inauthenticity, anxiety, dread, despair, and so on. All these themes border on the experiential circumstances of human beings and the duty they have to make existence meaningful for themselves.

Existentialism was also provoked by the destructive effects of the Second World War, the terror, tragedy and disaster of war and the need to find consolatory measures to the physical and mental devastation which the war effected on human beings. In addition, the crisis of the European man was an important prompting factor to the existentialist movement. This crisis lies in the deviation of the modern (European) philosophers from the preoccupations of the ancient Greek intellectual tradition which they claim to have inherited, to a purely scientific, rational and objectivist orientation. This development subsumes all the dimensions of man under the sweeping scientific methods such as objectivity, experimentation, generalization, verification, reason and logic. Accordingly, the emphasis of the nineteenth century philosophers on science as the only intelligible tool for the navigation and understanding of reality including human behaviour and emotion also serves as a prompting factor to the

intellectual movement of existentialism.

Nevertheless, existentialism has its roots and traces in the ancient Greek philosophy. However, the movement was properly systematized by Kierkegaard, whose philosophy itself was a revolt against the idealism and rationalism of philosophers like Hegel, Kant, and other rationalists who distanced themselves from the situations of human beings and their practical experiences in the world. Hence, Kierkegaard is regarded as the father of existentialism.^{vii}

The Reality of Evil as an Existential Problem

One might be prompted to question the relevance of the existentialist intellectual tradition to the problem of evil or wonder about how the problem of evil fits into the existentialist intellectual framework. This curiosity may be stirred by the fact that existentialists do not directly devote their writings to the analysis of the problem of evil in the world. Instead, their writings lament the meaninglessness of the world, the uncertainty that characterizes human existence and the purposeless end of death towards which the world ultimately drifts. Hence, they assert the reality of human suffering, address the causes, effect and how the problem of human suffering can be dissipated.

Nevertheless, it is untrue to maintain that the existentialists altogether, are oblivious of the reality of evil. In fact, it may be difficult to find any existentialist that does not talk about the reality of human suffering, which, in the strict sense of the term, is evil. It will therefore be a misconception to argue or conclude that the existentialists are oblivious of the problem of evil. Their understanding of the term reflects in their discussion of the themes of abandonment, absurdity, meaninglessness, nothingness, death and so on in their various writings.

The link between existentialism and the metaphysical problem of evil can therefore easily be traced to their major preoccupations. While metaphysics deals with the fundamental question of being and the nature of reality, existentialism concerns itself with the practical situations of human beings in the world – how human beings are helplessly trapped in the world, the meaning of which cannot be convincingly established in the face of anxiety, anguish, despair, death and other facticities that characterize existence. For this reason, existentialism is a philosophy that lays emphasis on the human situation or condition as its central focus.^{viii}

Human beings are enveloped in the paradoxes, contradictions and ambiguities of existence with which they must struggle relentlessly until death eventually terminates their lives. Ironically, man's effort to understand his existential situations exposes him to more complicated circumstances of existence, leading to further ambiguities and frustrations. To this end, Maurice Friedman contends that "the harder a man tries to fight his way through this ambiguity, in fact, the deeper his confusion must be if he is both conscious and aware."^{ix} These predicaments of existence hinder and rumple the aspirations and aims of human beings in the world. Accordingly, the helplessness of human beings in a meaningless world and the need to make human existence meaningful is a centre project of the existentialists.

Jean-Paul Sartre contends that human existence is contingent and absurd.^x To worsen the situation, the contingency of man's existence finds no external justification by which he means that man practically has nobody to hold responsible for his existential problems and he is perpetually locked up in the predicaments of existence until he finally dies. The idea of being helplessly trapped in the existential predicaments is what Sartre discusses extensively in his work titled *No Exit*. Existentialists therefore focus on the purpose of human beings in this strange world and their longing for freedom within their seemingly deterministic existential circumstances. This is what Sartre calls "human condition", which is not to be confused with human nature. Sartre emphatically distinguishes between the two when he explains that:

It is impossible to find in every man some universal essence which would be human nature, yet there does exist a universal human condition. It's not by chance that today's thinkers speak more readily

of man's condition than of his nature. By condition they mean, more or less definitely the *a priori* limits which outline man's fundamental situation in the universe. Historical situations vary...what does not vary is the necessity for him (man) to exist in the world, to be at work there, to be there in the midst of other people, and to be mortal (to die) there.^{xi}

The "*a priori* limits", as Sartre mentions above, is a pregnant phrase which seems to encompass all manner of things that can obstruct, prevent and cut the happiness of human beings and their hope short in existence. This may include: sickness, diseases, disasters, death, and so on. Sartre's notion of "varied historical situations" in spite of man the "necessity of man to exist in the world" seems to imply that the "*a priori* limits" which human beings face are not the same. That is, they differ according to the experiences that shaped their existences. Accordingly, existentialism addresses the question of human suffering and the absurdities of life arising from the presence of evil in the world and the need for human beings to rationalize existence or make the meaningless life meaningful as much as they can for themselves. While affirming the reality of evil and suffering as negative factors to human freedom, therefore, existentialists assert the freedom of human beings in the presence of various existential problems and advocate the need for human beings to constantly struggle to make meaning out of the obviously meaningless world, garnished on every side with inconveniences, predicaments, hardships and limitations that can make human life miserable, frustrating and absurd.

The reality of evil in the world is not a mere addendum to the meaninglessness and futility of human existence. Rather, it is a key factor that gives rise to that meaninglessness. One wonders what the main purpose of existence is and what role human beings should, in fact, play in a world characterized by evil and suffering, which is a negative and mesmeric phenomenon blocking their happiness and their aspiration for self-definition. This self-definition is what Nicolas Berdyaev probably refers to as personality. For Berdyaev, there are so many obstacles to the realisation of that personality. According to him,

Personality is suffering. The struggle to achieve personality and its consolidation are painful process. The self-realisation of personality presupposes resistance, it demands a conflict with the enslaving power of the world...pain in the human world is the birth of personality, it fights for its own nature.^{xii}

This is to say that the defining factors of human freedom and self-realization itself is suffering. Nevertheless, since existentialism concerns itself with the human condition and how human beings can make meaning out of their unpalatable existential conditions, this evocative feeling concerning the purpose of human beings in a world that is densely pregnant with suffering and other unpleasant factors that mesmerize human life, makes the problem of evil a major existentialist business. This goes in line with the submission of Oshitelu that "the problem of evil is not just a philosophical question, it is a practical question – it is purely an existential question."^{xiii} In addition, Ogunyomi also underscores the existential implications of evil, specifically contextualizing it in Yoruba thought.^{xiv}

In light of the above, we now begin to discuss the conceptions of evil and suffering from the perspective of different existentialists, bearing the difference in their religious convictions and their ideological affiliations in mind. We start with Kierkegaard, who is regarded as the father of existentialism.

Kierkegaard on the Reality of Evil and Suffering

Soren Kierkegaard as a Danish existentialist recognizes the reality of travails and suffering as

major characteristics of human existence. For him, human existence is absurd because the world as we have it, cannot be reduced to clarity and coherence.^{xv} This is an unavoidable facticity in which human beings naturally find themselves. However, human suffering for Kierkegaard, is also caused by the separation of human beings from their maker. This separation makes human beings to live a repetitive life which invokes boringness and meaninglessness. These repetition, boringness and meaninglessness are facticities of human existence. The separation between man and his maker and his relentless effort to find consolation in the world can also be described using Heidegger's terminology as the state of fallenness.

Human beings therefore become strangers in the world because of their detachment from their maker and their constant effort to find meaning even in that same world that is pregnant with repetition, boringness and meaninglessness without being cognizant of the state of their detachment from God. This makes human beings to live an inauthentic life. Most theistic existentialists agree with Kierkegaard's understanding of the world and human predicaments in it. That is why Jacques Maritain remarks that:

The existentialism of Kierkegaard, of Kafka, of Chestov, of Fondane, was an essentially religious irruption and claim, an agony of faith, the cry of the subjectivity towards its God. It was at the same time a revelation of the person and of his anguish in the face of the nothingness which is non-being in the existent, the "crack in the existent."^{xvi}

This "crack in existent" is the tension that arises in human beings when they are aware of the facticities, meaninglessness and purposelessness of the world and the responsibility which they have to bear responsibility for their attitude towards those facticities. Human existence is therefore characterised by that constant struggle with the facticities of existence, for which they are not responsible – but for which they will ultimately be held responsible. Nonetheless, human beings, for the theistic existentialists, are not altogether locked up in hopelessness as they have the freedom to look up to God in repentance in order to find meaning to their existential problems. This is what Kierkegaard describes as the leap of faith.^{xvii} Nevertheless, this freedom to either exercise a leap of faith or resign totally to fate (existential facticities) provokes what Kierkegaard describes as dread. This dread in turn evokes guilt and anxiety. For Kierkegaard,

Dread is the dizziness of freedom which occurs when the spirit would posit the synthesis, and freedom then gazes down into its own possibility, grasping at finiteness to sustain itself. In this dizziness freedom succumbs...and when freedom rises again, it sees that it is guilty. Between these two instances lies the leap (of faith), which no science has explained or can explain. He who becomes guilty in dread becomes as ambiguously guilty as it is possible to be. Dread is a womanish debility in which freedom swoons...in dread there is the egoistic infinity of possibility, which does not tempt like a definite choice, but alarms and fascinates with its sweet anxiety.^{xviii}

It is dread that leads to guilt, anxiety and inauthenticity which are the major defining factors of human suffering. In fact, Kierkegaard seems to use the concepts of dread and anxiety interchangeably because his definition of anxiety is synonymous to that of dread. Anxiety, like dread, is the dizziness of the possibility of freedom.^{xix} However, there is another facticity which Kierkegaard regards as evil. This is the pain of sickness, its torment and the inevitable end of death to which it leads. Kierkegaard describes this facticity as despair. According to him:

If there is to be any question of a sickness unto death in the strictest sense, it must be a sickness of which the end is death and death is the

end. This is precisely what despair is. But in another sense despair is even more definitely the sickness unto death...there is not the slightest possibility that anyone will die from this sickness or that it will end in physical death...the torment of despair is precisely this inability to die. Thus, it has more in common with the situation of a mortally ill person when he lies struggling with death and yet cannot die. Thus, to be sick unto death is to be unable to die, yet not as if there were hope of life; no the hopelessness is that there is not even the ultimate hope, death. When death is the greatest danger, we hope for life; but when we learn to know the even greater danger, we hope for death. When the danger is so great that death becomes the hope, then despair is the hopelessness of not even being able to die.^{xx}

Despair, for Kierkegaard, is even more painful than death and sickness. It is a state of not being able to die even when death becomes the last hope: Death itself is not the problem as it is the finality which awaits every individual. However, the painful torture of sickness and the futile longing for that finality (death) without being able to get it, is what is evil. This is what he calls despair. For Kierkegaard, therefore, dread, anxiety, sickness, death and despair can be described as evil because they bring about the end of human life after a series of immeasurable pain and torture.

However, this only happens when human beings resign to fate instead of leaping toward divine intervention. For Kierkegaard, if human beings return to God in repentance, they will, in the effect, be taking a leap to their authenticity because it is through human reunion with God that the human life can be freed from repetitive existence, characterized by boringness and meaninglessness. In addition, if an individual who exercises a leap of faith dies a physical death on earth, he has the hope of immortality in eternity. This is to say that human beings, however hard they try, cannot find meaning to their existence in the world unless they reunite with God. Accordingly, human beings are responsible for their own suffering in existence. Their authenticity and freedom lie in their willingness to make peace with their maker. In the same manner, their inauthenticity, anxiety and despair lie in their unwillingness to exercise the leap of faith and seek a divine intervention to their existential afflictions.

Karl Jaspers on the Reality of Evil and Suffering

Another theistic existentialist who offers a similar account of human suffering with Kierkegaard's is Karl Jaspers. Jaspers explains that the meaninglessness of human existence and the state of their fallenness results from their detachment from God. According to Jaspers, there are two characteristics of man – the future and the eternal. These are also designated by becoming and being. Through this, Jasper equates authenticity with living in existence as a free and responsible subject and to the unity of human beings with the transcendent (which can also be understood as God if we are to follow Kierkegaard's line of thought). That is the reason he says "in appearance, I exist only insofar as I become myself; in eternity, (I exist) only insofar as I reveal myself in appearance."^{xxi} This means that human beings can be said to exist in the proper sense of the term if they are free and responsible for their choices in existence. However, their choices and responsibilities in existence can either qualify or disqualify them for a proper eternal existence. This is because eternal authenticity means a reunion with the transcendent and anyone who fails to have a proper existence in the world of appearance is automatically disqualified from reuniting with the transcendent. He succinctly expresses this when he says:

I myself am nothing if I only have empirical existence. To be oneself means the unity of the twofolds: to live in independence and to have surrendered to the world and to Transcendence. Alone I am helpless,

but having surrendered to the world and to Transcendence I as myself have vanished. As myself I am independent, but not sufficient to myself...the self is actually only real when it manifests itself objectively in the world. Just as I do not exist without the world, I am not myself without Transcendence.^{xxii}

Jasper's use of the phrase "surrendered to the world" should not be interpreted as resigning to fate as Camus will call it or losing one's head in the crowd as Heidegger will understand it. Following his explanation on the reunion of human beings with the Transcendence as the mark of authenticity, it will be misleading to understand Jaspers in the light of Camus and Heidegger. Rather, it means acceptance of responsibility for one's choices and actions in existence and one's freedom and behaviour to the facticities of existence. The implication of this is that authentic existence in the world of appearance automatically qualifies one for authentic existence in the eternal world and that inauthentic existence in the world of appearance automatically qualifies one for inauthentic existence in the eternal world. However, authenticity for Kierkegaard is simply to exercise a leap of faith, which means looking up to God as the only being who is capable of making human existence meaningful in the face of the problems of the world instead of seeking meaning in the meaninglessness of the world itself. This, however, looks like a theodicy, which is the vindication of the goodness of God in the face of evil.^{xxiii} This makes Jasper's conception of authenticity more complicated than Kierkegaard's. Jasper, like Kierkegaard, imports the notion of eternity and Transcendence into his existentialism. Nevertheless, he asserts the freedom of human will and responsibility. Also, he emphasizes the priority of existence over essence like Sartre and Heidegger. This can be deduced from his following statements about authenticity:

We exist either in authentic activities or we do not exist, because passivity is equal to nothingness. I must will; for to will must be my ultimate if I want to exist authentically. However, the manner in which I will freely determines how Transcendence manifests itself to me...as I am, I am responsible for myself and yet only in being free do I discover who I am...Transcendence is not my freedom, but is present in it.^{xxiv}

In another place, he characteristically claims that "without existenz the meaning of Transcendence is lost"^{xxv} This presumably is what he means when he says that "only through existenz can Transcendence become present without superstition, as the genuine reality which to itself never disappears"^{xxvi} Nevertheless, Jaspers recognises that there are certain facticities with which human beings relentlessly struggle in existence despite the fact that their authenticity depends on their unity of the Transcendence, which has meaning only in existence. He calls these facticities limit situations. These situations are death, guilt, suffering, strife and chance.^{xxvii} According to him, they are the five antimonies which the subject faces in existence and they are resisting elements which mean misfortune and suffering to man. However, as long as man makes a constant effort to reunite with the Transcendence, these resisting elements are mere temporary obstacles to man's authenticity. However, if man refuses to make effort towards the Transcendence, he struggles forever with those resisting factors or limit situations until death finally takes him away.

Paul Tillich and many other theist existentialists also see death as a limit situation to human happiness. In fact, for Tillich, death itself is a state of non-being, which constitutes a negative factor to life. The awareness of death is what brings anxiety and this anxiety about the finiteness of being cannot be eliminated.^{xxviii} Meanwhile, to argue Tillich's position that death is a state of non-being seems to imply that death is the same as what has never existed. This, however, is absurd. Death can rather be described intelligibly as "ceasing to exist." For theist existentialist therefore, all these unavoidable facticities that human beings struggle with in

existence, represent evil in the way of human beings to authenticity, which is a leap of faith.

Heidegger on the Reality of Evil and Suffering

Martin Heidegger takes an ontological approach to his own question of being. He is a German existentialist who believes that we cannot arrive at an intelligible interpretation of the human condition if we fail to first investigate into and understand the very question of being. However, for him, if we continue to take the fundamental ontological underlining factors of human existence for granted, we may lose sight of the attempt to understand the core nature of reality. Accordingly, the most important subject of Heidegger's existentialism becomes the very question of Being or "being-in-the-world", which he also represents with the technical world, "Dasein", meaning "being-there."^{xxix} The situation of man in the world according to Heidegger is that of "thrownness" or "abandonment". For Heidegger,

Dasein's average everydayness can be defined as Being-in-the-world which is falling and disclosed, thrown and projecting, and for which its ownmost potentiality-for-Being is an issue, both in its Being-alongside the world and in its Being-with-others.^{xxx}

The human condition is that of abandonment or thrownness because human beings do not solicit to be spun into existence and the various precarious realities in it – they merely find themselves in existence. That is the Heideggerian notion of Dasein as being-there. It is also synonymous with Sartre's notion of nothingness and abandonment, which signify the dilemma that human beings confront in the existence that has no purpose and must be given a purpose.

Heidegger therefore represents the situation of man in the world with what he calls three cares or concerns. These concerns or cares are the major characteristics of human existence and they are measured with the parameter of time, since human beings are temporal beings towards finiteness or death and as such, subject to the dictates of time. The first care or concern is facticity which represents the past in relation to time and human finiteness. The second is existentiality which represents the future in relation to time and human temporality. The third one is fallenness which, in relation to time, represents the present condition of man. All these concerns present human beings as possible beings towards death.

The states of facticity and fallenness are for our purpose, the states of predicaments. They signify the states of human suffering and evil. The state of facticity is where human beings suddenly find themselves in the heart of existential problems without knowing what to do. This state represents one's thrownness and abandonment in existence without any clear purpose or aim which one must fulfil while the state of fallenness is the awareness of the situations with which one must grapple without making any effort to transcend the situations or letting those situations to overshadow one by losing one's head in the crowd. Heidegger's fallenness here is synonymous with Kierkegaard's dread and Sartre's badfaith. Existentiality is the understanding of the situations that surround human existence and the resolution to make meaning out of those situations. This is the state that leads to authenticity while the states of fallenness and facticity lead to inauthenticity.

The themes of death and anxiety are important themes in Heidegger's existentialism. They are as well relevant to our discussion of the problem of evil. Death is the strictest facticity that awaits all men and no one can prevent any other person from dying. That is why Heidegger contends that "no one can take the other's dying away from him."^{xxxi} Human beings in existence are cognizant of their finiteness and their helplessness in the face of death. Their existence is terminated by death, which is the most dreadful of all facticities of existence. However, Heidegger sees death as the most certain possibility as far as human existence is concerned. As such, he contends that human beings are thrown beings towards death, where

death is a kind of potentiality which man is in existence to actualize. This can be deduced from the following statements:

By its very essence, death is in every case mine, in so far as it is at all. And indeed death signifies a peculiar possibility-of-Being in which the very Being of one's own Dasein is an issue. In dying, it is shown that mineness and existence are ontologically constituted for death. Dying is not an event; it is a phenomenon to be understood existentially.^{xxxii}

Human beings are thrown towards death. However, the awareness of this death brings anxiety, which, according to him, is not to be understood as fear (Heidegger 1963, 294-298.) Being Dasein's ownmost possibility therefore, anticipation of death frees human beings from the existential predicaments of worry, lostness, fear, etcetera and sets their feet on the part which leads to the realization of authenticity.^{xxxiii} Nevertheless, death, for Heidegger, is what gives meaning to existence because it is the most certain possibility. The life of authenticity therefore lies in the awareness of the finitude and temporality of man.

Sartre on the Reality of Evil and Suffering

Sartre is a French existentialist. His own conception of the problem of evil revolves around the notions of nothingness, badfaith, anxiety and death. Nothingness in this sense, signifies the futility of human existence and the indefinite, unclear and unpredictable circumstances that surround human beings in existence. Human beings contingently find themselves in the world which they did not ask to be given birth to. In this world again, they encounter unpalatable existential predicaments which further complicate the initial meaninglessness of existence. All these existential predicaments are facticities. These facticities of existence make it obvious that the world as we have it is not patterned to achieve any purpose. Human beings are just there to blindly push through the meaninglessness of existence and find meaning even in that meaninglessness.

The urge to forge ahead or surrender to the existential problems signifies man's freedom in his existential predicaments. As such, Sartre maintains that human beings can either reshape their conditions or surrender to their defining existential circumstances. By making either of the two decisions, human beings can either make meaning of their situation by living up to the life of authenticity or by drifting back and drowning into the life of inauthenticity. Both choices make responsibility inescapable. Accordingly, human beings are ultimately responsible for the decisions they make in the face of facticities surrounding their existence.

The awareness of choice, freedom and responsibility provokes the sense of anxiety in human beings. This anxiety arises because human beings are aware of their freedom to choose and their responsibility for whatever choice they make. Again, the anxiety is further complicated by the fact that human beings cannot choose not to choose. In other words, there is freedom to make whatever decision one wants to make in the face of the facticities of existence. However, making a decision is compulsory. In which case, one cannot choose not to make a decision. The conglomeration of freedom, choice and responsibility therefore plunges human beings into another paradox of existential predicament. According to Sartre,

Anguish, abandonment, responsibility, whether muted or full strength, constitute the quality of our consciousness in so far as this is pure and simple freedom...in anguish, we do not simply apprehend the fact that the possibles which we project are perpetually eaten away by our freedom to come; in addition, we apprehend our choices – i.e., ourselves – as unjustifiable. This means that we apprehend our choices as not deriving from any prior reality but rather as being about to serve as foundation for the ensemble of significances which constitute reality...Thus we are perpetually threatened by the nihilation of our

actual choice and perpetually threatened with choosing ourselves – and consequently with becoming – other than we are.^{xxxiv}

Sartre, however, contends that “human-reality everywhere encounters resistance and obstacles which it has not created.”^{xxxv} But for him, “these resistance and obstacles have meaning only in and through the free choice which human-reality is.”^{xxxvi} Sartre avers that human beings should be held responsible for whatever they make out of the facticities of existence as they have freedom to make choice. Apart from the tough situations that surround human existence and the feeling of anxiety that arises in man at the awareness of his choice, freedom and responsibility, Sartre asserts that the dominance of the majority (or others) through their norms, customs or value systems over the individual is evil and any effort made by an individual to escape the facticities of existence by losing his head in the crowd or looking up to an external force for help is evil. He designates these circumstances by different concepts. When an individual loses himself in the crowd or subsumes himself under societal value system, he is said to be leaving an inauthentic life in which case, he positions himself as an object in relation to the others (the crowd) instead of the subject who is directly in charge of his existence. However, when an individual looks up to external intervention, he is said to involve himself in badfaith. Inauthenticity and badfaith are evil because they are obstructive to an individual’s authenticity and they turn individuals to passive object instead of active subject.

For Sartre, human beings are responsible for whatever they become in existence and even for their reactions to the facticities of existence. His emphasis on responsibility rests on his belief that existence precedes essence, by which he means that one exists before one becomes. Following this line of thought, any notion of determination or predestination is ruled out as nonsensical. Apart from this, human beings, through their freedom, venture into so many things in existence – through their technological innovations and dynamic nature, human beings invent machines, engines and other sophisticated instruments which both cause happiness and injuries to man. Accordingly, the onus of responsibility for the destructions, pains, injuries displeasures and suffering which man’s inventions has inflicted upon him, rests on the shoulders of man. It is just like the view of John Macquarrie that “the world reacts on man because human beings are also creators in it.”^{xxxvii}

According to Sartre, man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. This, for him, is the first principle of existentialism.^{xxxviii} Again, he asserts that “man is at the start a plan which is aware of itself, rather than a patch of moss, a piece of garbage, or a cauli-flower; nothing exists prior to this plan; there is nothing in heaven; man will be what he will have planned to be.”^{xxxix} Human beings are therefore only in the world to create their essence and take full responsibility for the kind of essence they create for themselves.

Nonetheless, there is one fundamental facticity which Sartre sees as a dreadful reality to human existence. This is the awareness of death. The awareness that man’s life is finite, limited and temporal according to Sartre, is a devastating reality to human existence. This is contrary to Heidegger’s view that the finiteness of human beings is exactly what gives meaning to human existence and that death is Dasein’s own most possibility. In a total disagreement with Heidegger’s view, Sartre contends that:

To contemplate my life by considering it in terms of death would be to contemplate my subjectivity by adopting with regard to it the other’s point of view... Thus we must conclude in opposition to Heidegger that death, far from being my peculiar possibility, is a contingent fact which as such on principle escapes me and originally belongs to my facticity. I can neither discover my death nor wait for it nor adopt an attitude towards it, for it is that which is revealed as undiscoverable, that which disarms all waiting, that which slips into all attitude... death is a pure

fact as birth is; it comes to us from outside and it transforms us into the outside. At bottom, it is in no way distinguished from birth, and it is the identity of birth and death that we call facticity.^{xi}

Sartre could not fathom how death could bring meaning to human existence as Heidegger posits. Apart from being the terminating factor of human existence, death, according to Sartre, is like the prevalence of others on the individual in which case, the individual becomes a mere passive object that will be defined by an external factor. However, according to Berdyaev, “the object is always evil, only the subject can be good.”^{xli} For Sartre, therefore, anything that will terminate human existence and put a permanent stop to all the endeavours of human beings, even to the conflicts, afflictions and paradoxes that characterize human existence, cannot be the same thing that will give meaning to what it is cutting short. By extension, anything that determines the condition of man from the outside is evil. The phenomenon of death is like the accident of birth. They are both facticities against which human beings are totally helpless. Accordingly, they are not the ultimate potentiality or defining factors of the meaningfulness of human existence. Evil, for Sartre, therefore, lies in the facticities of existence, especially in the indeterminability of birth and death; freedom of man and his innovation in nature, the dominance of the individual by the others and the relapse of the individual into the crowd or his appeal to external factors for help. For all these, however, human beings are responsible because, as far as Sartre is concerned, they are *condemned to be free*.^{xlii}

Dostoevsky on the Reality of Evil and Suffering

Dostoevsky is another interesting atheistic existentialist who belongs to the same category with Nietzsche. His works lament the meaninglessness of life and of human existence in general. For him, there is no point attributing the reality of evil to God (the Judeo-Christian God) because given the ugly realities and predicaments that surround human existence, it does not make sense to even imagine that such a God bombarded with all the attributes of Omnipotence, Omniscience, and so on, exists. Having denied the existence of God after Nietzsche, he sees man as the inventor of value and the stakeholder of good and evil in existence. He characteristically paints the pictures of human suffering, especially of moral evil in his works and how human beings are helpless in the presence of existential suffering.

The most detailed picture of moral evil which Dostoevsky paints can be seen in his work titled *The Brothers Karamazov*, where he laments the ruthlessness of Russian Generals especially their callousness towards children and women during the war. He describes this as “bestial cruelty.” According to Dostoevsky, Russian Generals demonstrated a very high level of brutishness by ordering a boy to run and unleashing their soldiers – all on horses to run after and shoot at the boy.

However, what is most striking about Dostoevsky is that despite the fact that his works lament the meaninglessness of life and reality of human suffering, he sees evil as a necessary phenomenon in human existence. In fact, he prescribes suicide as a way out for anyone who thinks the problems of existence are too unbearable. For him, suffering itself makes existence meaningless. However, without it, human existence cannot be meaningful. He pursues this line of thought in his *Notes from the Underground* when he asks the question:

Why are you so firmly, so solemnly convinced that only the normal and positive, in short, only prosperity, is of benefit to man?...Perhaps suffering is just as good for him as prosperity? And man does love suffering very much sometimes...in the Crystal palace it is unthinkable: suffering is doubt, it is negation, and what sort of Crystal palace would it be if one were to have any doubt about it? And yet I am convinced that man will never renounce real suffering, that is to say destruction and chaos. Suffering! Why, it's the sole cause of

consciousness.^{xliii}

He further reinforces his thought on the necessity of suffering in human existence when he says in *The Brothers Karamazov* that :

The absurd is only too necessary on earth. The world stands on absurdities, and perhaps nothing would have come to pass in it without them. we know what we know...surely, I haven't suffered, simply that I, my crimes and my sufferings, may mature the soil of the future harmony for somebody else.^{xliv}

Apart from pointing to the fact that there is no God, for Dostoevsky, the absurdities and sufferings of the world are not just useless phenomenon in existence as they toughen human beings and drive them to the path of what they ought to be, which is a god – or to use Nietzsche's term, a super-person. If it has been established that there is no God and that there is evil in the world, man should be held responsible for the presence of evil in the world because in place of God, he is now the creator of value, hence of good and evil. This is also Nietzsche's line of thought.

Albert Camus the Reality of Evil and Human Suffering

Albert Camus is an Algerian. However, he is often categorised with the French existentialists, especially the atheistic trend. The core of Camus' existentialist perspective on the problem of evil lies in the notion of absurdity and his reflection on the philosophical problem of suicide. He uses the concept of absurdity to designate the irreconcilability of man's want in existence with what existence in fact, offers to man. The world as we have it has no definite meaning and many people have concluded that it is not worth living. As such, they commit suicide. Camus therefore sees the phenomenon of suicide as a serious philosophical problem because it borders on judging whether life is worth living or not, which for him, amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.^{xlv} He agrees with his predecessors' contemplation on the meaninglessness of human existence and the problem of suffering in the world. For Camus, this universe is completely inexplicable because it is:

Suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. All healthy men having thought about their own suicide, it can be seen, without further explanation, that there is a direct connection between this feeling and the longing for death.^{xlvi}

Camus maintains consistently with his predecessors' claim that the world is meaningless and full of suffering. He, in fact, sees the sufferings of the world as major reasons human beings commit suicide. However, he disagrees with his predecessors' recommended ways out of the existential sufferings. Heidegger sees the anticipation of death as the only guarantor of authenticity; Dostoevsky and Sartre support suicide; Nietzsche recommends the will to becoming an overman; Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Tillich, and many other theist existentialists recommend a leap of faith.^{xlvii} Nevertheless, for Camus, none of these scholars is right on how human beings can address the existential problem of suffering. Suicide, for him, is an act of cowardice: it is an act of surrendering in defeat to the sufferings of existence and confessing that existential problems are too unbearable for one. In fact, Camus describes the theist existentialists' recommendation of leap of faith as a philosophical suicide. For all we know, it suggests that human beings look up to a God, whose existence and non-existence has not even been ascertained or convincingly established. Accordingly, these intellectuals made a very fundamental mistake by thinking that looking up to a divine intervention is the only way of the

sufferings of existence.

The idea of a Judeo-Christian God who created the world has long been rejected by atheist existentialists like Nietzsche, Dostoevsky and Sartre. This is because they found it difficult to reconcile the attributes which He is believed to possess with the unimaginable amount of evil and suffering in human existence. Nietzsche, for instance, claims that God is dead. While Dostoevsky thinks that there is practically no reason to believe in His existence given the enormity of suffering that characterizes human existence – especially the suffering of children in the hands of Russian Generals during the war. Sartre (1947, 45) categorically states that “even if God exists, it will change nothing.” Be that as it may, these atheist existentialists envisage the need to invent human value systems to replace that of the Judeo-Christian God even if it means more evil and suffering than that which has ever been experienced by humanity. Camus describes the renunciation of the Judeo-Christian God by his predecessors as a metaphysical revolt. Describing the atheism of Dostoevsky, he unequivocally states in *The Rebel* that:

The protest against evil which is at the very core of metaphysical revolt is significant...It is not the suffering of a child, which is repugnant in itself, but the fact that the suffering is not justified. After all, pain, exile, or confinement are sometimes accepted when dictated by good sense or by the doctor. In the eyes of the rebel, what is missing from the misery of the world, as well as from its moments of happiness, is some principle by which they can be explained. The insurrection against evil is, above all, a demand for unity. The rebel obstinately confronts a world condemned to death and the impenetrable obscurity of the human condition with his demand for life and absolute clarity. He is seeking without knowing it.^{xlvi}

Camus sees human existence itself as a death sentence. Hence, in the above excerpt, he says the world is condemned to death. This accords with Heidegger’s statement that we are thrown to death. However, while Heidegger sees death as the most certain possibility, Camus sees revolt as guarantor of authenticity. Human beings, for Camus, are *fated* to struggle relentlessly with problems in existence. He likens human existence to the Sisyphean task, an eternal task which death itself cannot terminate - and which must be repeated over and over.

The Sisyphean task which Camus uses to explain the predicaments of human beings in existence is a myth of a prince that was condemned to roll a large rock up a hill by the gods. This rolling of rock up a hill signifies the pains sufferings and predicaments that characterize human existence. At the very beginning of the task, Sisyphus was discouraged and weighed down by the enormity of his punishment. However, along the way, he turned his punishment to a hobby and changed his pains to pleasure, having being fully informed that there is no escape route for him out of the sufferings of existence. This implies that even death, which could have easily put an end to the task of Sisyphus, has also been forbidden to take him away! Sisyphus’ situation now is now what Kierkegaard describes as despair: a state of not being able to die when death becomes the last hope. Nevertheless, instead of surrendering in defeat to the discouraging pains of the task, or looking up to divine intervention, Sisyphus revolted and turned the task itself to pleasure. Admiring and celebrating Sisyphus’ resolution, Camus says “a face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself...He is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock”^{xlvi}

Therefore, for Camus, Sisyphus’ freedom and authenticity consist in his revolt against his task. He says “the lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory.”¹ In the same manner, Camus contends that human freedom and authenticity from their existential predicaments lie in facing the problems and sufferings of the world. When human beings are

fully aware that there are no ways out of the sufferings of existence and are ready to measure up to the task by facing those sufferings just like Sisyphus, it is only then that they can find meaning, happiness, freedom and authenticity even in the face of existential miseries together with its endless and hopeless labour.

Conclusion

Having explained that the problem of evil is an urgent existentialist concern, we have made an effort in this paper to articulate the existentialists' conceptions of the problem of evil by considering various existentialists' views both in the theistic and atheistic schools. For the existentialists, precarious occurrences of the world like disasters, accidents, flood, diseases, sickness, death, and so on, that ensue whether naturally or morally, invoke a feeling of meaninglessness of existence in human beings.

These, for them, are the facticities into which human beings are thrown, abandoned and locked up. The arbitrariness of birth, futility and hopelessness of human labour in existence and the abrupt end of death make the meaninglessness and the absurdities of human existence evident. Accordingly, the facticities of existence echo the evidential argument from evil.

In spite of all these facticities, however, the existentialists contend that human beings are responsible for their suffering in the world because they have the freedom to either subsume themselves under the shadows of existential facticities, thereby living the life of inauthenticity, or grow beyond those facticities to the glorious zenith of authenticity. Hence, the reactions of human beings to the precarious circumstances that surround them in existence, make responsibility inevitable for them. Accordingly, for the existentialists, evil is such feeling of anxiety, anguish, dread, and despair, galvanized by the facticities of existence and the awareness of freedom, loneliness, choice, responsibility, the meaninglessness of existence, the suffering that characterizes human existence, and the awareness of the finitude of human life in existence.

There are different prescriptions made by the existentialists on how human beings can overcome their existential sufferings. Kierkegaard and many other theistic existentialists recommend the leap of faith; Heidegger prescribes the anticipation of death and resoluteness in the presence of its anxiety; Nietzsche, Dostoevsky and Sartre recommend the will to be an overman and suicide (if the situation warrants it). However, Camus condemns suicide and recommends revolt, rebellion or defiance to existential problem of suffering using the myth of Sisyphus' endless struggle with his rock.

Existentialists understand evil as a real factor that characterizes human existence and they designate it with such euphemistic concepts as nothingness, meaninglessness, thrownness, absurdity, finitude and other psychologically related words like dread, anxiety, despair, guilt and anguish. However, while many of them are optimistic that human suffering can be overcome, some of them see suffering as defining factor of existence without which existence itself will not be meaningful. Existentialists like Kierkegaard, Sartre, Tillich, Jaspers, Camus and so on belong to the optimistic camp while people like Dostoevsky, Berdyaev and a host of others belong to the pessimistic camp.

Endnotes

ⁱ Abidemi I. Ogunyomi, "The Existential implications of evil suppressing Measures in Yorùbá Philosophy," *Caribbean Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2022): 107–122; Abidemi I.

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ⁱⁱ Frederick Coplestone, *Logical Positivism and Existentialism: A History of Philosophy* (Vol. 11. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1972), 125-147.

ⁱⁱⁱ Monday Igbafen, "Existential Issues in African Philosophy," *Core Issues in African Philosophy*, ed. Olusegun Oladipo (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2006), 90-101.

^{iv} Samuel Stumpf & Fiester James, *Socrates to Sartre and Beyond: A History of Philosophy*, 7th edition (London: Kenneth King, 2003), 450.

^v Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness*, trans. Intro. F. Williams, & R. Kirkpatrick, (New York: Noonday Paperbacks, 1957), 150.

^{vi} Olatunji Oyeshile, "An Existentialist Critique of Husserlian Phenomenological Approach to Knowledge," *Footprints in Philosophy*, ed. R. A. Akanmidu, (Ibadan: Hope Publications Ltd, 2006), 53.

^{vii} G. A. Oshitelu, *Religion, God and Evil: Issues in Philosophy and Religion*, (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2010), 34.

^{viii} Frederick Coplestone, *Logical Positivism and Existentialism: A History of Philosophy* (Vol. 11. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1972), 201; Macquarrie John, *Existentialism*, (USA: Corpus Instrumentorum Inc, 1972,) 2; Abidemi I. Ogunyomi, "An Existential Interpretation of Evil: A Critique of Egun Oduwole and Fayemi Kazeem on the Philosophical Problem of Evil in Yoruba Thought," *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* 47, no. 1(2024): 93.

^{ix} Maurice Friedman, *The Worlds of Existentialism: A Critical Reader*, (New York: Humanity Books, 1999), 382.

^x Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. E. Barnes, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 628.

^{xi} Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism*, trans. B. Frechman, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), 45.

^{xii} Nicolas Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), 27.

^{xiii} G. A. Oshitelu, *Religion, God and Evil: Issues in Philosophy and Religion*, (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2010), 59.

^{xiv} Abidemi I. Ogunyomi, "The Existential implications of evil suppressing Measures in Yorùbá Philosophy," *Caribbean Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2022): 107–122; 2024, 87- 101.

^{xv} John Foley, *Albert Camus: From Absurd to Revolt* (New York: Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 8.

^{xvi} Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, trans. L. Galantiere & G. B. Phelan (Doubleday Image Book, 1956), 131.

^{xvii} Anselm Jimoh, *An Introduction to Existentialism, Phenomenology and Hermeneutics* (Ibadan: Ebony Books, 2014), 53.

^{xviii} Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, trans. and intro. W. Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), 55.

^{xix} Vasiliki Tsakiri, *Kierkegaard: Anxiety, Repetition and Contemporaneity* (New York:

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^{xx} Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, trans., ed., and intro. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 17-18.

^{xxi} Karl Jaspers, "The Illumination of Existenz," *The Worlds of Existentialism: A Critical Reader*, ed. and Intro. Maurice Friedman (New York: Humanity Books, 1999), 149.

^{xxii} Maurice Friedman, *The Worlds of Existentialism: A Critical Reader* (New York: Humanity Books, 1999), 150.

^{xxiii} Emmanuel A. Ogundele and Abidemi I. Ogunyomi, "Evil and the problem of Justification: Re-examining some Traditional Theodicies," *Dominican University Journal of Humanities 2*, (2021): 33–47.

^{xxiv} Maurice Friedman, *The Worlds of Existentialism: A Critical Reader*, 151.

^{xxv} Maurice Friedman, *The Worlds of Existentialism: A Critical Reader*, 152.

^{xxvi} *Ibid*

^{xxvii} *Ibid*, 102.

^{xxviii} Glenn Gray, "The Idea of Death in Existentialism," *The Journal of Philosophy* 48, no.5 (1951): 118; Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University press, 1952), 35-38.

^{xxix} Jim Unah and Chris Osegenwune, *Phenomenology and Existentialism* (Lagos: Fadec Publishers, 2010), 138.

^{xxx} Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 225.

^{xxxii} *Ibid*, 284.

^{xxxiii} *Ibid*.

^{xxxiv} *Ibid*, 307-311.

^{xxxv} Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 464-465.

^{xxxvi} *Ibid*, 488.

^{xxxvii} *Ibid*.

^{xxxviii} John Macquarrie, *Existentialism* (USA: Corpus Instrumentorum Inc, 1972), 62-63.

^{xxxix} Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism*, trans. B. Frechman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), 18.

^{xl} *Ibid*.

^{xli} Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 545-546.

^{xlii} Nicolas Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), 27.

^{xliii} Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1947. *Existentialism*, 27.

^{xliiii} Fyodor Dostoevsky, "Notes from the Underground," *The Best Short Stories of Dostoevsky*, trans. And intro. David Magarshack (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 139.

^{xliiii} Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. C. Garnett (New York: The Modern Library, 1943), 299-300.

^{xliiii} Albert Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. J. O'Brien, intro. J. Wood, (New York: Penguin Books, 1975), 11.

^{xlvi} Ibid, 13.

^{xlvii} Ibid, 27-50.

^{xlviii} Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. & revised. A. Bower (Vintage International Edition, 1991) 53.

^{xlx} Albert Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 109.

^l Ibid.

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