

Educational Existentialism

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Abstract: *The transmission of worthwhile knowledge for the total man seems to be the basis upon which most educational curriculum of schools is fashioned. In this twentieth century, more emphasis seems to be placed on technical, vocational and scientific content in our educational pursuit. This it appears has been done to the detriment of humanistic education that captures the existential situation that bedevils man, some of which leads to suicide, terrorism, pornography, robbery, prostitution, drugs and so on as a consequence. This paper is a philosophical attempt to re-ignite our preference in what we consider worthwhile to transmit to the pupils with the aim of drawing our attention to the "lived experience" of man's vicissitudes. It tries to inquire whether education can make some difference in this regard in the area of handing over the tools to the pupils in order for them to be able to probe into the underlying nature of reality for an authentic living from a dialogical perspective.*

I. Introduction

Education has gained an unprecedented acceptability and status that is unparalleled. Little wonder, almost everyone wants to gain some level of education. Opinions however differ on who an 'educated man' is. And this informs the dichotomy between formal education on the one hand and informal education on the other hand. Formal education is understood as a state sanctioned institutionalized education. Harris (1979:1) puts it in proper perspective thus:

The key features of education then are that it is formal and institutionalized that it is provided or sanctioned by the state and institutionalized; and that it is deliberately concerned to provide its charges with a broad understanding of the world (1).

On the other hand, informal education "has been the traditional way by which the human race has educated its young" (Park, 1974:230). It is a type of education that is the opposite of formal education hence knowledge here is gotten from experience and in other strange ways and manner other than in a state sanctioned institution.

From crèche, kindergarten through primary, secondary and tertiary education, we can sense a great imbalance in the curriculum content of schools because of wrong preference and values attached to materialism. People just want to get a certificate so that they can live a good life. But whether a degree or a diploma guarantees a good life is a subject for another day. But suffice it to say that the structure of most education curricula gives undue emphasis on acquiring skills that can make one earn a living without balancing the equation with other salient important area of studies that harps on man, his finitude, his fears, his existence, his facticity and so on. Perhaps it is such kind of concern that made Ivan Illich (1972) to call for a de-schooling of society. This is how he retorts:

The de-schooling of society implies a recognition of the two faced nature of learning. An insistence on skill drill alone could be a disaster; equal emphasis must be placed on other kinds of learning (24).

It is not a secret that several countries of the world today are faced with serious economic recession. There are a whole lot of job cuts without so much a hope to create new ones. This has led to a wide spread unemployment leading to all kinds of depression, suicide, drugs, robbery and so on. Now by way of analysis one would ask: what is the connection between a person losing a job and going into depression? What is the connection between a person losing valuable properties worth millions and billions of dollar and then committing suicide? Why would one want to take his/her life because of material losses or other considerations? These issues are as serious as obtaining a degree without proper emphasis on man and his existential realities.

Unfortunately it does appear that when it comes to matters of the "mind", people hardly pay much attention perhaps because it is seen as abstract without much value attached to it. But we shall keep ignoring the

kind of education that focuses on the 'ontology' of man to our peril because, we shall soon realize that there is a whole lot of interconnectedness between 'mind' and 'matter' and it is the proper blend and harmony of the two that will give our pupils the right foundation to face whatever challenges that is peculiar to man and common in our world. It is for these reasons that this paper will x-ray education as formal and state sanctioned via its curricula in order to be able to identify what kind of preference we give to our curricula content and teaching pedagogy and whether it captures the "lived experience" of man and his existential situation and if it also gives him a mind of his own to probe into reality. Let us now turn to the concept of education for further insight.

II. Understanding The Concept Of Education

Education as conceived by Peters (1970) is a concept which is not very close to the ground. By this he means that it is not a concept like 'red' which picks out a simple quality; like 'horse' which picks out an object; or like 'running' or 'smiling' which picks out observable occurrences (1). However, we must attempt to unearth the concept of education. To begin, we shall glean from the perspectives of some key authorities in education.

Peters gives us some criteria for understanding the concept of education. He talked about the normative aspect of education which implies a reform. Here it is held that something worthwhile should be achieved and there must be evidence that it is. Hence it would be a logical contradiction to say that a man had been educated but he had in no way changed for the better (Peters 1966:25). This is like making education a task-achievement process which entails a model education of some sort.

We also have the cognitive aspect of education which goes beyond skill acquisition. However, we do not call a person 'educated' who has simply mastered a skill even though the skill may be highly prized such as pottery. For a man to be educated it is insufficient that he should possess a mere know how or knack. He must have also some body of knowledge and some kind of a conceptual scheme to raise this above the level of a collection of disjointed facts (Peters 1966:30). We would not call a man who was merely well informed an educated man. He must also have some understanding of the "reason why" of things.

The Spartans, for instance, were militarily and morally trained. They knew how to fight and they knew what was right and wrong; they were possessed of certain stock of folklore. But we would not say that they had received a military or moral education; for they had never been encouraged to probe into the principles underlying their code. It is also possible for a man to know a lot of history in the sense that he can give correct answers to question in the class-room and examinations; yet this might never affect the way he looks at the buildings and institutions around him. We might describe such a man as knowledgeable but we would not describe him as 'educated', for 'education' implies that a man's outlook is transformed by what he knows. Ivan Illich (1972) captures this point clearly when he states that:

Work, leisure, politics, city living and even family life depend on schools for the habits and knowledge they presuppose, instead of becoming themselves the means of education (11).

There must be a cognitive perspective to education and a clear distinction between 'education' and 'training'. A man with a 'trained mind' is one who can tackle particular problems that are put to him in a rigorous and competent manner. An "educated mind" suggests much more awareness of the different facets and dimensions of such problems (Peters 1966:32).

Education it has been argued, involves the intentional transmission of what is worthwhile. For something to count as an educational process, then, a minimum of comprehension must be involved. This is quite compatible with formal instruction and commands with some level of voluntariness on the part of the ones being educated. For Paulo Freire, education must be dialogical and problem-posing. It is otherwise known as liberating education. The thesis of this kind of education is summarized thus:

...the oppressed must confront reality critically, simultaneously objectifying and acting upon that reality. A mere perception of reality not followed by this critical intervention will not lead to a transformation of objective reality-precisely because it is not a true perception (Freire 1980:28).

The oppressed that Freire is talking about could be likened to those people that are bound to seeing things from a stereotype position through the banking process of pedagogy or teaching without the opportunity for a dialogical (interactive, probing) encounter.

Harris (1979) opines that education embodies three particular functions. It selects from the infinite body of knowledge, packages that are thought to be particularly worth knowing. It then provides the means and

resources whereby those things can be approached and known. And finally, it applies pedagogical expertise in an attempt to ensure that these things are learnt and known (2). And I may so add that after the learning process, a certificate, diploma or a degree is usually awarded having been found worthy in character and learning. But that is not the end of the journey. The graduate will discover sooner or later that there is more to reality and life itself outside the confines of the school. It is on this account that Park (1974) makes the following remarks:

Indeed the mounting criticism of our schools during the past two decades appears to have stemmed in part, at least, from the increasing effectiveness of certain competing means of informal education, and from the continued schism between what is learned in school, and what is going on and learned outside of school (230).

From the afore-quoted, it appears that, through deduction we could affirm the truth that the students acquires formal education through teaching and learning process only to graduate and come face to face with another kind of education that is more real and practical by their 'lived experience' and existential situation. At this point, can the knowledge gained by exhausting the curricula content in school help out when it involves making critical life decisions? This is one question that should make us re-assess and review our educational curriculum with the view to including those aspects of reality that are fundamental to our existential survival. Let us now move away from the understanding of the concept of education to the background and basic tenets of existentialism.

III. Background And Tenets Of Existentialism

Existentialism is a loose title for various philosophies that emphasize certain common themes: the individual, the experience of choice, and the absence of rational understanding of the universe with a consequent dread or sense of absurdity in human life (Black-burn 2005:125). Existentialism attained its zenith in Europe following the disenchantments of the Second World War. However, the first significant thinker to stress such themes was Soren Kierkegaard a Dane whose work is generally regarded as the origin of existentialism. Other thinkers whose works have existentialist themes are Albert Camus, Jean Paul Satre, Martin Heidegger, Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, Martin Buber amongst others.

Existentialism is basically concerned with concepts such as, human freewill, human nature chosen through life choices, personal responsibility and discipline. It holds also that society is unnatural and its traditional religious and secular rules are arbitrary and that worldly desire is futile. To the existentialist, human life is no way complete and fully satisfying because of suffering and losses that occur when considering the lack of perfection, power and control one has over his life.

A very good picture is the one painted by Albert Camus in the book *Myth of Sisyphus*. He narrates that the gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labour. David E. Cooper (1999) offered the following the general conception of existentialism:

Existentialism was a philosophy born out of the angst of post-war Europe, out of a loss of faith in the ideals of progress, reason and science which had led to Dresden and Auschwitz; if not only God, but reason and objective value are dead, then man is abandoned in an absurd and alien world. The philosophy for man in this 'age of distress' must be a subjective, personal one. A person's remaining hope is to return to his 'inner self', and to live in whatever ways he feels are true to that self. The hero for this age, the existentialist hero, lives totally free from the constraints of discredited traditions, and commits himself unreservedly to the demands of his inner, authentic being (11-12).

It would be erroneous to describe existentialism as an expression of an age. To this end, it is to suggest that its claims could be only temporarily and locally valid. But if the accounts of the distinctiveness of human existence, of the inter-dependence of mind and world, of our existential freedom and so on are true at all, they are true of human beings at all times and in all places. These accounts, furthermore, stem from reflections on the perennial condition of human beings, and not the particular situation obtained in post-war Europe.

None of the great existentialist tones contain the word “existentialism”. Reports on its origin differ, but it seems to have been coined towards the end of world war 11 by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel as a label for the currently emerging ideas of Jean-Paul Satre and his close friend Simone de Beauvoir.

Kierkegaard conceives existentialism as a “well thought out view of life, of ‘the truth’ of ‘the way’ (Rader 1976:325). This is so for him because the abstraction of Hegelianism did not supply what he demanded, a truth which is true for him, to find the ideal for which he can live and die for. However, he turned to Christianity in order to attain that truth that is wholly personal and individualistic.

For Martin Heidegger, existence is as it is “given” as it were, at the base of man’s affairs. The kind of being which man has is inextricable tied to his existence. Man is not a peculiar species which has the luxury of aloofness and separateness from existence. He is ‘there’ in and of existence; “thrown” as it was into existence so that he is inseparable from it. Man cannot be an isolated and separate ‘subject’ who can look at existence as a spectator and in his own subjective way. Nor is man an ‘object’ which is so completely integral to existence that he has no subjective view of his own. He is both ‘subject’ and ‘object’ at the same time, and also at the same time tied to existence. So distinctly prior is existence in the nature of man as the base of his being, that the distinction between subject and object is artificial and arbitrary.

Man in Heidegger is necessarily given to certain moods, given the great realities of his experience. For one thing he is anxious, for another, he is also burdened with care. Every individual men must recognize, however unwelcome, that his present being moves toward his own, death, the termination of his own existence.

Jean Paul Satre, indebted to Heidegger gave a different shade of meaning to existentialism that was not in his predecessors. One of his chief thesis is an emphasis on the negative side of existence, or its vacuum, as it were, at least as far as individual man is concerned. Man exists now in himself. He is what he is at this time, commonly called the facticity of himself. Other themes in Satre’s existentialism are being for itself, consciousness and freedom, being-for-another, possibility, and value.

IV. Educational Implication Of Existentialism

The school has been alleged to be unable and inefficient in helping our children master the knowledge and skills they need to live in a highly technological and constantly changing society. This attack is coming from the humanistic educators who claim that today’s schools are not only repressive but mindless and inhumane because it has destroyed children’s spontaneity, inquisitiveness, and creativity. This is coming at a time when the world is faced with a lot of natural and economic disaster leading to despair, angst and anguishes in the minds of individuals.

Humanistic educators generally agree that education can be made more meaningful to the learner’s life if it is “humanized”. Thus Maslow (1971) opines that “education should be a matter of learning what is desirable and undesirable, learning what to choose and what not to choose”(178). As a humanistic psychologist, Abraham Maslow states that in this kind of education, the child’s self-knowledge and introspective ability are more important than what he or she can acquire through associative learning, or operant conditioning. This is not to say there are no useful skills and knowledge one can gain through associative learning. But such learning is deemed insignificant, because the most important purpose of education is to make people become better persons and live a fulfilling life.

Let us get a very important point straight at this juncture of our concern for a balance education that is, a complete curricula that takes care of important aspects of reality that is worth transmitting which is necessitated on the grounds that education especially the ones provided by the state also known as formal education seem to neglect. This neglect of certain aspects of reality is at the detriment of the pupils. Existentialism is a way of examining life in a very personal manner. It calls for deep reflection of one self, one’s environment and the cares, challenges and burdens that man is faced with. And because human beings possess volition, or will which gives them freedom to make choices, they are faced with a lot of choice-making situations.

It appears and very well so that our education, especially the type we gain from the classroom does not seem sufficient to make us escape the challenges of life. This kind of education seems to be modeled after the capitalist ideology that perpetuates class distinction in the society. And the knack for one to own a degree and be in a certain class with the illusion of living the good life has resulted in all kinds of mushroom educational institutions whose sole aim is to award degrees without content and competence what so ever. The story of a man was told who got a phony e-mail telling him to pick up a degree in just ten days without any course work; this is laughable!

Paulo Freire harped on the dialogical method of education that is dialogue based. Here the students are given room to make inputs in the course of teaching. They are to ask questions, disagree if need be with the teachers view and see reality from a perspective that may be incongruent with that of the teacher. But what most educators do is to deposit all kinds of information and knowledge on the student in a kind of ‘banking’ process without the freedom of the student to have a choice or say a word.

Education is for life. Therefore, education is to help us make meaning of our existence and the world we live in. It is to help us make right decisions and choices. It is to help us to be creative and for our soul to be illuminated. All these and much more speak volume on why the existentialists believe that:

Human beings are desperate creatures who realize that life is temporary. They live in a world where other-persons, institutions, and agencies-are constantly seeking to impinge upon and violate their choice-making freedom (Ornstein and Levine 1989:228).

Existentialism does see hope behind man's desperation. Each man can choose to be an inner-directed, authentic person. An authentic person is one who is free and aware of his or her freedom through personal responsibility. Thus the educational implications of existentialism are many. The existentialist realizes that we live in a world of physical realities and that we have developed a useful and scientific knowledge about these realities. However, the most significant aspects of our lives are personal and non-scientific. Thus the existentialists would say about knowledge and education that the most important kind of knowledge is about human condition and the choices that each person has to make. Existentialists would further say that education is a process of developing consciousness about the freedom to choose and about the meaning of and responsibility for choice. Education thus should be designed to create in us a sense of self-awareness and to contribute to our authenticity as human beings. Paulo Freire (1972) gives great insight into this kind of education when he avers thus:

When an illiterate peasant participates in this sort of educational experience, he comes to new awareness of self, has a new sense of dignity, and is stirred by a new hope... 'I now realize I am a man, an educated man' we were blind, now our eyes have been opened'. Before this, words meant nothing to me, now they speak to me and I can make them speak (12-13).

An existentialist educator in terms of pedagogical praxis would encourage students to engage in philosophizing about the meaning of human existence of life, love and death through a dialogical process. He can also raise pertinent and crucial life questions before the students in order to engage their minds. Of course the outcome of the answers to these questions will be personal and subjective for each individual and could not be measured on an objective test.

Concerning the curriculum content, an existentialist experiences and subjects will create room for dialogue. The subjects should be the one that vividly portray individual men and women in the act of making choices. Hence because of the personal and subjective choice making in existentialism, those subjects that are emotional, aesthetic, and poetic are appropriate to an existentialist curriculum. Others are literature and biography, drama and films that portray human condition. Human decision making are to be discussed by students with modes of self-expression.

V. Conclusion

The happening in the world today shows that there is an urgent need for a balance to be struck as we choose from a vast array of worthwhile knowledge to be transmitted. Some might argue that most educational curricula contains humanistic contents but the question is how sufficient is this humanistic content? What kind of pedagogical approach do our teachers take? Do we misrepresent reality presented to the students? Do we give the students the opportunity to engage nature and situations in dialogue? There is no better time to pay closer attention to our type of education, its content and method of teaching than now else we will keep having persons who have passed through schools, but are not educated. They cannot confront existential reality when it stares them in the face; the best they can do is to look for an escape route which will either lead to suicide, drug addiction, prostitution, robbery and other kinds of social vices in a bid to have this false and illusive consciousness of escape.

On a final note, the authorities in charge of fashioning out the curricula content in our schools should do more in terms of research that will promote this humanistic education. Teachers should be trained and re-trained. Our education should lead to liberation of the mind of the students and at the same time make them independent and self-reliant. No more should humanist education be relegated to the background; every stakeholder must show whole-hearted commitment to its progress and advancement. And it is the attempt to begin this paradigm-shift that necessitated the proposal for an educational existentialism.

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