

EMPTINESS AND DEPRESSION AMONG YOUTHS: A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION

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ABSTRACT

Depression is presented as both a harmful emotional state and a sign of the self's longing for purpose and belonging. This paper examines the growing sense of emptiness and depression among youths, treating these not merely as psychological issues but as deeply philosophical. The paper observes how young people today struggle with identity, freedom and meaning in a world shaped by overwhelming choice and digital distraction. The paper therefore investigates how emptiness emerges in ordinary moments, such as a student suddenly feeling lost despite success or a young adult sensing loneliness amid constant online activity. The paper concludes that meaning is neither given nor found in isolation but is shaped through authentic self-awareness, deliberate choices and supportive communal relationships.

Keywords: Emptiness, Depression, Youth, Meaning, Freedom.

INTRODUCTION

Emptiness is not a concept that most young people articulate easily, yet it quietly shapes much of their emotional and spiritual landscape. Many youths today move through life with a subtle sense of disconnection, as though something essential within them has gone silent. They attend lectures, share laughter with friends, post pictures online and make plans for the future, but there are moments often unexpected when they feel a hollow pause inside themselves. It may come late at night when the noise of the world finally fades, or in the middle of a busy day when their own achievements suddenly feel distant and unimportant. The experience is not simply sadness; it is a deeper uncertainty about who they are and what their lives mean.

This paper begins from that simple but profound human feeling, the quiet acknowledgment that many young people do not feel fully at home in their own existence. Although the modern world offers more freedom, information and opportunity than any previous generation could imagine, it also confronts the youth with the immense responsibility of constructing meaning for themselves.

This condition reflects a tension within the human being, the desire for purpose combined with the burden of freedom. Existentialists describe this tension as part of the human condition, but the youths feel it in a uniquely intensified way. Social pressures, the constant presence of technology and the erosion of communal support structures complicate the search for identity and belonging.

This paper seeks to examine these themes thoroughly. It begins by clarifying the concepts of emptiness, existence and personhood to lay a foundation for deeper reflection. It then analyzes the lived experience of contemporary youth, explaining how social, technological and economic forces shape their existential struggles. The paper further examines depression as a form of existential disclosure, revealing the inner conflict between the self's potential and its present limitations.

EMPTINESS, EXISTENCE AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

Emptiness is a phenomenon that defies simple description. It is more than boredom, sadness or isolation; it is a lived encounter with the limits and possibilities of existence. Young people today often find themselves in moments of profound stillness or subtle awareness, when the routines, achievements and social performances that occupy their daily lives fail to provide any sense of authentic satisfaction. These moments reveal not a temporary lack but a deeper philosophical condition: the recognition that life, while full of activity and appearances, may be devoid of meaning if one's existence is not engaged authentically.

Emptiness, therefore, is a disclosure. It unveils the tension between the self as it is presented to the world and the self as it longs to become. Unlike mere loneliness, which arises from the absence of companionship, or depression, which is often treated medically, existential emptiness confronts young people with questions that transcend circumstance: Who am I really? What does it mean to live a life worth living? What is the purpose of my choices? In these moments, the self is not hidden but exposed; the individual is called to examine not only their environment but the very structure of their being.

Existence, in this context, is not merely biological life but the conscious awareness of one's being-in-the-world. Existentialist thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger describe existence as a condition of freedom and responsibility: human beings are "condemned to be free," compelled to shape themselves and their world through choices, yet always aware of the consequences of those choices. For contemporary youth, the freedom to define oneself is simultaneously exhilarating and terrifying. In a society that promises limitless opportunities for self-expression, social recognition and achievement, the individual is faced with the immense responsibility of making decisions that will shape identity, purpose and future possibilities.

Depression is often intertwined with existential emptiness, but it is more than a clinical or psychological state. Existential depression reflects the awareness of life's apparent futility when a person senses a dissonance between their lived reality and their inner values or aspirations. For example, a young graduate may achieve professional milestones yet feel a persistent void within,

a subtle yet persistent questioning of whether these accomplishments resonate with their authentic self. This form of depression exposes the structural tension between the self's potential and its current state, revealing the complexity of the human condition in an age dominated by rapid social change and digital connectivity.

THE ONTOLOGY OF EMPTINESS IN CONTEMPORARY YOUTH EXPERIENCE

To explore existential emptiness among contemporary youth is to engage the very nature of human being. Ontologically, emptiness is not a simple lack; it is a state of exposure, a revealing of how life feels when the scaffolds that normally provide stability such as familial guidance, community belonging, religious practice, or coherent social structures are weakened or absent. It confronts young people with the fundamental reality of existence - they are free, conscious and responsible, yet often unsure how to navigate life in a meaningful way.

One key factor contributing to this ontological emptiness is the burden of choice. Modern youth are faced with a proliferation of options in education, careers, relationships and lifestyles. Social media amplifies the visibility of others' achievements and lifestyles, creating constant comparisons and raising questions about authenticity and self-worth. The young person may ask: Am I choosing this career, friend, or life path because it aligns with who I am, or because I am performing the role others expect of me? This tension between personal desire and external expectation produces a subtle, persistent dissonance that emptiness exposes.

Another central dimension is the fragmentation of identity. Contemporary youth often navigate multiple roles: student, friend, child, partner, worker, social media persona, activist, and more. These roles rarely align seamlessly; leaving the self scattered and fractured. The curated nature of digital life exacerbates this fragmentation, as each online presence becomes a performance designed to garner approval, visibility, or recognition. Youth may begin to feel that the self they present is not fully their own, leading to a profound ontological unrest - a feeling of inhabiting one's life only partially.

The erosion of communal grounding further intensifies emptiness. African philosophy emphasizes that the individual becomes fully human through community, shared moral practices and relational obligations. Yet contemporary youth often experience relational connections as transient, mediated or shallow. The absence of deeply embedded communal structures - rituals, extended family cohesion, mentorship and shared moral narratives leaves the young person to navigate existence largely alone. Philosophically, this condition demonstrates that personhood is not only an internal project but a relational one: the vacuum of communal support reveals the fragility of individual identity when disconnected from collective life.

Furthermore, ontological emptiness manifests in the temporal and reflective dimensions of consciousness. Youth often contemplate past choices, future possibilities and hypothetical outcomes in ways that magnify the sense of lack. A graduate may ruminate over career decisions, imagining alternate paths; a young adult may reflect on failed relationships or lost opportunities. These reflections, though intellectually stimulating, frequently exacerbate the awareness of the self's incompleteness and the contingent nature of existence.

In essence, the ontology of emptiness is a philosophical mirror. It shows contemporary youth the conditions of their own freedom, the disunity of the self and the fragility of human connection. It is not merely a problem to solve but a reality to confront, a phenomenon that challenges young people to understand themselves, the structures that shape their lives and the moral and existential choices available to them. Emptiness, while uncomfortable, signals the potential for self-reflection, ethical responsibility and the pursuit of authentic existence.

FREEDOM, ANXIETY AND THE FRAGMENTED SELF

Freedom is at the heart of human existence, yet it is precisely this freedom that generates the profound anxiety experienced by contemporary youth. Existentialist philosophy teaches us that to exist is to be free, but freedom is not simply the ability to make choices, it is the responsibility to define oneself in a world without predetermined meaning. For many young people today, the expansion of freedom is paradoxical. On one hand, they have unprecedented access to information, education and opportunities to craft identities and pursue life paths. On the other, the absence of clear guidance, coupled with social, economic and technological pressures, magnifies uncertainty and internal tension. Freedom, when experienced as a moral and existential imperative, can become a source of anxiety - a gnawing recognition that the self must construct meaning and coherence in a world that provides no guarantees.

Anxiety, in the existential sense described by Kierkegaard and Heidegger, is not simply fear or worry; it is the awareness of the self's finitude and responsibility. It arises when young people confront the fundamental fact that they are alone in shaping their destinies, despite living within a social network or community. Consider the experience of a recent graduate: they may possess the qualifications, skills and social connections to succeed, yet the open-endedness of life choices such as career, relationships and personal values provokes an inner unrest. This anxiety is ontological; it is about being itself rather than any specific circumstance. It reflects the tension between the self as it is and the self as it longs to be, and it often manifests in feelings of emptiness, indecision and self-doubt.

The fragmentation of the self further complicates this dynamic. Contemporary youth navigate multiple, often conflicting roles: they are students, workers, friends, family members, online personas and social advocates. Each role imposes expectations, behaviors and identities which frequently fail to cohere into a unified sense of being. The result is a fragmented self, a condition in which authenticity feels elusive and the individual experiences a persistent disconnection from their own core identity. Philosophically, this fragmentation reflects the fundamental structure of modern existence: humans are beings-in-the-world, yet in contemporary life, the world itself is fractured, mediated through digital spaces, cultural narratives and social expectations. The self must constantly negotiate between these fractured realities, often without a stable anchor.

Yet freedom and anxiety are not merely burdens. They are the conditions under which the self becomes aware of its potential. Anxiety signals that the individual is confronting the possibility of self-definition, and freedom provides the means to act on that possibility. For youth experiencing emptiness, this confrontation is simultaneously painful and revelatory: the void of meaning is also the space in which authentic life can emerge. A student reflecting on the dissonance between societal expectations and personal passion may feel despair, but this reflection also opens the

possibility of deliberate, conscious choices that align with inner values. In this sense, existential anxiety is both a challenge and an invitation, a philosophical call to self-realization.

DEPRESSION AS AN EXISTENTIAL DISCLOSURE OF BEING

Depression, particularly among contemporary youth, is often approached as a clinical or psychological phenomenon, yet a purely medical lens cannot capture its existential significance. Philosophically, depression can be understood as an existential disclosure, a manifestation of the self's confrontation with meaninglessness, fragility and the limits of existence. It is the silent voice of the inner self signaling the tension between what life is and what it could or ought to be. This is especially relevant for young people who, despite access to unprecedented opportunities, often find themselves grappling with emptiness, fragmentation and social alienation.

Consider a young adult navigating a competitive academic environment. They may excel in grades, secure internships and cultivate social connections, yet feel an ineffable weight pressing upon them. There is no specific trauma, failure or event to explain this heaviness; it is instead a reflection of the inner dissonance between external achievement and internal fulfillment. Depression, in this sense, becomes not merely an emotional state but a philosophical revelation. It exposes the structural gaps in existence where freedom, choice and responsibility collide with uncertainty, social pressures and the dissolution of relational and communal frameworks.

Existentialists like Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre have long argued that anxiety and despair emerge when humans confront the abyss of freedom. Depression can be seen as a heightened form of this confrontation, revealing the weight of freedom in a world that offers little guidance for authentic self-realization. Youth feel the pressure of choice acutely: what career path to take, which relationships to prioritize, which values to embody. Every decision carries potential consequences and the awareness that one's life is ultimately self-shaped can be overwhelming. Depression here is a mirror reflecting the human condition itself: it forces the self to acknowledge its finitude, fragility and moral responsibility.

Furthermore, depression often carries a temporal dimension, tied to reflection on past choices and anxieties about the future. A young person may dwell on perceived failures, lost opportunities or societal comparisons, creating cycles of rumination that deepen the existential void. These reflections illustrate the phenomenological dimension of depression: it is experienced in the body, the mind and the consciousness of being-in-the-world. The heaviness, apathy or numbness is thus not merely biological; it is ontological, signaling the self's confrontation with the absence of authentic grounding, meaning and relational support.

Importantly, understanding depression philosophically does not negate the need for psychological or medical support; rather, it complements these approaches. It frames depression as a revelatory experience: the self is signaling its need for authentic engagement, moral reflection and relational grounding. Depression becomes both a warning and an opportunity, an invitation to confront the inner void, examine the fragmentation of the self and seek pathways toward coherence, meaning and authentic existence. In this way, depression is not merely a pathology but a philosophically rich phenomenon, essential for understanding the deeper structures of contemporary youth experience.

MEANING, VALUE AND SELFHOOD: PHILOSOPHICAL PATHWAYS BEYOND THE VOID

If depression and existential emptiness reveal the fragility of contemporary youth existence, they also illuminate the potential for transformation. The void is not merely a space of loss; it is a horizon of possibility. Philosophically, the experience of emptiness can serve as a catalyst for the construction of meaning, value and authentic selfhood, guiding young people to confront the profound questions of existence and to seek coherence in fragmented lives.

The first step toward meaning is self-reflection. Young people must engage deeply with the structures of their lives: the roles they inhabit, the values they adopt, the social narratives they internalize and the expectations they perform. This reflective process is inherently philosophical, as it requires inquiry into the nature of selfhood, moral responsibility and the alignment between external life and internal values. For instance, a youth navigating multiple social roles as a student, employee, child and online persona must ask: which of these identities reflects my authentic self? Which are imposed by societal pressures, parental expectations or digital performance norms? Through such reflection, the self begins to discern coherence, identifying which aspects of life contribute to meaning and which perpetuate emptiness.

Existentialist philosophy emphasizes that meaning is not given but created. Life does not automatically provide purpose; human beings must actively shape it. Sartre's notion of radical freedom underlines that every choice, every act, is an affirmation or negation of selfhood. For youth experiencing emptiness, this insight is both daunting and liberating: they must take responsibility for crafting lives that align with authentic values. This could involve pursuing careers that resonate with personal passions rather than societal expectation, fostering relationships grounded in mutual respect and care rather than superficial conformity or engaging in creative or ethical projects that reflect intrinsic purpose.

Beyond reflection and relational grounding, the creation of value is central. Youth are called to translate insight into action that embodies personal and moral principles. Ethical living, creative expression, care for others and social contribution allow the individual to inhabit life authentically. This process transforms the experience of emptiness from a destructive void into a space of generative possibility. Moments of depression and existential despair are reconceived as signposts: they highlight areas where the self is misaligned with its values, inviting corrective action and deliberate cultivation of meaningful life practices.

Finally, the philosophical pathways beyond the void demand integration of internal freedom and external responsibility. Authentic existence requires youth to navigate the tension between self-determination and relational obligations, between inner aspiration and communal reality. By consciously aligning choices, moral actions and relational engagement, young people can cultivate selfhood that is coherent, ethically grounded and existentially fulfilling. Emptiness and depression, while challenging, become opportunities to confront the human condition, explore the depths of being and emerge with a self that is not only resilient but authentically alive.

CONCLUSION

Existential emptiness and depression among contemporary youth are not merely psychological phenomena to be treated clinically; they are profound disclosures of human existence. Through this paper, we have explored the multiple dimensions of these experiences: the internal confrontation with freedom, responsibility and identity, as highlighted by existentialist philosophy and the external relational and ethical dimensions emphasized by African thought. Both perspectives reveal that the void experienced by youth is not a sign of weakness but a reflective space that calls for deliberate engagement, ethical action and relational reconnection.

The study shows that youth today face a unique convergence of challenges: the pressures of digital life, fragmented identities, social comparison and weakened communal structures. These conditions intensify the existential awareness of emptiness and the possibility of depression. Yet, paradoxically, they also offer an opportunity. When youth engage with their freedom intentionally, reflect on their inner values and ground themselves ethically and relationally, the emptiness becomes a space for meaning-making, moral development and authentic selfhood.

By synthesizing existentialist and African perspectives, the paper emphasizes that authentic existence is not a static achievement but a dynamic and ongoing process. It requires courage to confront anxiety, wisdom to discern ethical responsibilities and relational engagement to situate freedom within communal life. The journey toward authentic existence transforms emptiness and depression from experiences of despair into catalysts for growth, reflection and moral self-realization.

Ultimately, this work underscores that addressing existential emptiness among youth demands both philosophical reflection and practical engagement: guiding them to create lives of coherence, purpose and relational depth. The void, rather than being a limitation, becomes a horizon for possibility, inviting young people to live courageously, ethically and authentically in a world that is both complex and full of potential.

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