



THE MEANING OF LIFE: A CRITIQUE OF SYNERGETIC SPECIALISM

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Abstract

The introduction to the book of Ecclesiastes in the Kings James version of the bible describes King Solomon as “a Philosopher” who reflected deeply on how short and contradictory human life is, with its mysterious injustices and frustrations, and arrived at the conclusion that human life is “vanity of vanities”, “a chasing after the wind”. But in a paper entitled “Synergetic Specialism: A Philosophy of the Meaning of Life” Adekunle Ibrahim submitted that nothing in life exists for nothing, that something ultimately exists for something. In other words, life is not a vanity upon vanity nor ‘a chasing after the wind’; rather, every unit of existent, for him, exists for a purpose. The objective of this paper is to critically evaluate the claims and submissions of Adekunle’s Synergetic Specialism “as a system of thought that sees reality as a web of synergy between and among speciated entities for cross-functional necessity”. The issues here include the questions of the ontology of human existence and the notion of being. In other words, is every unit of existence a ‘specially netted’ and uniquely endowed being? What is a being? Also, is every existent of necessity? The method employed in tackling these questions are the critical and hermeneutic methods. The author is commended for a deep philosophical reflection and analysis of the meaning of life including the view that ‘nothing exists for nothing’. However, the paper disagreed with Ibrahim on many fronts including the point that ‘existence is not by chance but out of necessity’. It is the opinion of this paper that existence is by chance and not out of necessity.

Keywords: Existence, Existent beings, Life, Ontology, Social constructivism

Introduction

What is life and what is living? Is there a unique purpose for every existent being? Is every existent being connected one way or another to other existent beings? The question about the meaning of life, purpose and connection is a question that has puzzled philosophers, theologians, scientists, and even ordinary people for centuries. There has not been found a definite answer to these questions because of dispositions that depends most times on religious, cultural, professional, personal, and existential persuasions. In his monograph entitled: *Living the Marvel of the Evening Life*, Ben Okwu Eboh opines that “the beginning and end of human life has remained a mystery”. According to him, ‘each one of us finds him/herself in this world without, in any way, bargaining for it. There, we find out selves and there, we begin our journey of life. And each person follows a different road map, perhaps unknown to him or her as human beings’ (1). The deduction from Eboh is that no living human being had a choice or contributed to his/her being on earth including the particular region of the earth to hail from. Human beings found themselves on the earth and has since their arrival continued to work hard to unravel the meaning of life, where life began, where life is taking humanity to and the end of life or as Eboh



puts it..." One day, in one way or another, the journey of life will end in spite of yourself" (2) And so, the question here is what is life?

The Merriam Webster online dictionary defines life in several senses including 1. The quality that distinguishes a vital and functional being from a dead body; 2. A principle or force that is considered to underlie the distinctive quality of animate beings; 3. The Sequence of physical and mental experiences that make up the existence of an individual's etc. From these definitions above, one can deduce life to mean the fundamental aspects of human existence that encompasses physical, emotional, mental and spiritual dimensions. Along these lines, philosophers of different epochs and orientations have made differing efforts to situate the meaning of life and living. For example, the existentialists believe that life has no inherent meaning but that it is up to the individual to create their own purpose and meaning. According to Uduma, "existentialism upholds the uniqueness of every individual. Every human person is self-conscious and no two human beings are identical. Every human person should therefore be conscious of his individuality and his existence, his freedom and the attendant responsibility. Man is not determined and therefore not beholden to pursue an inevitable course of self-realization of the absolute in the Hegelian Sense. Man is himself the architect of his own fate". (65). Existentialism is therefore a call to man to see himself as a self-transcending being who is always going beyond what he is presently. According to Uduma, it is from this stand-point that existentialism derives its capstone; 'existence precedes essence', which means that men make their essences as they go along, they do not live out a pre-determined essence (66). In other words, existentialists believe that life can only begin to make meaning to an individual as he/she wade's through it.

The Hedonist on their part gives a different perspective to the meaning of life. For them, pleasure should be the primary goal of life. Hedonists believes that individuals should seek to maximize their pleasure and minimize their pain. For Epicurus, who is the founder of the pleasure principle '... we recognize pleasure as the first goal innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again" (Stumpf, 112). Although hedonism is severely criticized for being a subjective and selfish principle that lacks consideration for the well-being of others; it however, seeks to give answers to the meaning and purpose of life. For them, it could be deduced that if one must make meaning out of life, it must be through the pleasurable experiences rather than the painful ones. For, it is through pleasure that one can find meaning and fulfilment in life. But the humanists think otherwise.

Humanists are of the view that the meaning life is found in the cultivation of human values such as compassion, empathy and kindness. According to Corliss Lamont (14) humanism is the view point that men have but one life to lead and should make the most of it in terms of creative work and happiness, that human happiness is its own justification and requires no sanction or support from supernatural sources; that in any case the supernatural usually conceived in form of heavenly gods of immortal heavens does not exist and that human beings using their own intelligence and cooperating liberally with one another can build an enduring citadel of peace and beauty upon this earth". Lamont's view according to Ishaya (309) represents to a large extent, the 20th century conception of humanism. It is intended to set humanity free from the



stranglehold of religion and beliefs in the supernatural thereby enthroning reason and human capabilities as a means to liberation as well as tools to conquer nature.

What the analysis of the different perception of the meaning of life by the different schools of thought shows is that life means what one makes of it. The intention therefore of this paper is to critically evaluate the submission of Ibrahim Adekunle in his paper entitled "Synergetic Specialism: A philosophy of the meaning of life" where he sees reality " as a web of synergy between and among speculated entities for cross-functional necessity" (1).

The meaning of Synergetic Specialism.

Synergetic specialism is a coinage of Adekunle Ibrahim to express his deep thought on the essence of life and reality. For him, Synergetic Specialism is derived from two words - synergy and speciation. Synergy is derived from the Greek word *sunegia* and the Latin word *synergia* which means "working together". Thus, synergy means the interaction or cooperation of elements, substance or other agents to produce a combined effect that is more impactful than the sum of their separate effect" (29). On the other hand, speciation is a word that comes from the Latin word - *specie*, which means a kind or form and *ation* which means 'action' or 'process'. When conjoined, becomes, speciation. 'Speciation therefore refers to a process of developing a kind of form from a group with distinct features. It is the process whereby a group of specie separates from other members of its kind and develops its own unique, and special characteristics. Through this process, populations evolve into distinct and special species of their kinds for symbolic existential benefits (29). For Ibrahim, the word "speciation" as used in the description above connotes 'special' in the description of a distinct specie. Therefore, specialism is used in place of speciation which according to him, is for conceptual originality, including theoretical and aesthetic appeal, as well as pronunciation fluency in the expression of the phrase - Synergetic specialism. Thus, from the analysis of the etymology of Synergetic Specialism above, Ibrahim defines Synergetic Specialism as a system of thought that articulates reality as a web of Synergetic or speciated entities for cross-functional necessity. For him, Synergetic Specialism upholds "individual uniqueness and collective necessity as the defining principles of existence (29). The inspiration for this conclusion comes from his experiences of mixed-cropping methods in African traditional farming system and mutualism in biological science. These experiences revealed to him that existence is a web of symbolic relationships where uniquely speciated entities exists side-by-side for each other's benefits. Thus, bringing to clarity the idea that "nothing exists for nothing, something exists for something". For him, from the analysis of Synergetic Specialism, it should be concluded that "to exist is to function and to function is to exist". Therefore, Synergetic Specialism is an affirmation of the existence and functionality of every existent entity with the unique characteristics of functionality not for its individual benefit but for the good of other existent entities. This is problematic and there lies the crux of the matter.

The questions that agitate the mind from the conclusion of Ibrahim include: 1. Is existence a condition for functionality? Rene Descartes in his methodic doubt may have answered this question in the affirmative with his *cogito ergo sum* statement (I think, therefore, I exist). Where he believes that his ability to think and reason guarantees his existence (21). In other words, so



long as one's brain is functionally thinking and reasoning, then such a person exists. Thus, the cessation of thinking will in turn mean the cessation of existence and its functions. But that is not the resolution of the quagmire; the problem of functionality still has to be resolved. Do all existents have a function that should be beneficial to other existent beings? Who determines what is beneficial to other beings from the functionality of other existent beings? The benefactor or the beneficiary? The point here is that contrary to Ibrahim's assertion that "for something to be said to exist; presupposes its uniqueness and functional relevance in the web of existence" (30); this paper is of the opinion that some things exist with practically no relevance to other existent beings and in spite of its uniqueness, has no beneficial function to itself. For example, abstract and hypothetical entities such form, blackhole, space, and even parallel universes; these entities are believed to exist but their functionality and relevance is entirely subjective and dependent on the context of linguistic application by other beings. Therefore, their functionality and relevance are all dependent on the subjective and linguistic Whims and caprices of some other existent beings notably human beings.

Basic Tenets of Synergetic Specialism and the meaning of life

The following points as enunciated by Ibrahim encapsulates the basic doctrines of synergetic specialism viz:

1. Nothing exists for nothing; something exists for something.
2. Reality is a web of speciated units with cross-functional necessity.
3. Every unit of existence is a 'specially netted' and uniquely endowed being.
4. The fulfilment of a unit is in its synergetic engagements with other units.
5. Existence is a web of interaction and exchange of energies.
6. Existence is not by chance; but out of necessity of a kind.

While it may be tempting to agree with all the basic tenets of synergetic specialism, it is however philosophically imperative to point out some contradictions in all the basic teachings of synergetic specialism.

Firstly, it was established in this paper that somethings do exist for nothing. It is not all existent beings that exist for the benefit of itself or others. Secondly, it is agreed that reality is a web of "speciated" units but to say that they all have cross-functional necessity is to miss the mark. While some entities may of necessity function to benefit itself and others, some other entities have no necessary benefits to others.

Ibrahim also made the point that the fulfilment of a unit is in its synergetic agreement with other units; if this is the case, what fulfillment will a human being get in its synergy with a lion or other dangerous animals? Granted that the lion will get fulfilled after making a meal out of the human being; perhaps, on the other hand, the human being may also be fulfilled after managing



to put a lion in a cage for commercial purpose or research. The point here is that none of these beings will get any fulfillment except to the detriment of the other. This argument also counters Ibrahim's notion that "existence is a web of interaction and exchange of energies; the question then is; what kind of energies are these existent beings exchanging? Negative or positive? And to whose benefits are the energies directed at? If negative energies are directed at the destruction and elimination of other existent beings, should they be termed necessary function and beneficial?

Lastly, Ibrahim opined that "existence is not by chance; but out of necessity of a kind". Of what kind? This paper disagrees entirely with him on this point. This is because even the holy bible makes the point that existence is hinged on time and chance. According to Ecclesiastes 9:11:

I returned and saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all (KJV).

The deduction from above highlights the unpredictable nature of life and existence where time and chance is the decider of existence and not of necessity as assumed by Ibrahim. In other words, existence is by chance; that is why if one cuts a piece of bread, put it in a container and close it tightly for a space of four to eight days, and open the lid thereafter, you discover, living organisms that have grown out of that piece of bread. The growth of those organisms came by chance and not of necessity. Therefore, existence is by chance and not of necessity. Ben Eboh (1) alludes to this position when he averred that:

Each one of us finds him/herself in this world without, in anyway, bargaining for it... and each person follows a different road map, perhaps, unknown to him or her as human beings (1).

From Eboh's perspective, one can securely conclude that existence is by chance. It is not determined and therefore not of necessity of whatever kind or nomenclature.

The Meaning of Life and the Ontology of Existence

Ibrahim conceives living as being in a synergetic relationship with others. For him, life is an experience of synergetic engagements between and among living entities. This is because an individual is a special breed of human kind with a sense of belonging necessitated by the synergetic condition of life (31). For him "man detest loneliness as he is fundamentally a social being whose existence subsists in a synergetic imperative" as a special breed of being. Man, according to Ibrahim is "endowed with inner energies which is seen as "wit ins" (potentialities) with which he locates his "wit out" (possibilities)... thus, the actuality of the meaning of life entails the synergy of the potentialities and possibilities within the web of existence". The web of existence is composed of intersecting points that provide the needed platform for synergetic engagements between and among human beings... the meaning of a man's life therefore subsists in locating the synergetic points where his 'wit ins' connects his 'wit outs'. (32).

From the exposition above of Ibrahim's conception of the meaning of life, it can be inferred that Ibrahim puts man or the human being at the zenith of life and existence and every other existent



being exists for the fulfilment of man's potentialities and possibilities. But this conclusion contradicts his initial position that "reality is a web of speciated units with cross-functional necessity. So if "the web of existence is composed of intersecting points that provide the needed platform for synergetic engagements between and among human beings", then where lies the point of intersection between other existent beings and among their kinds and other kinds of beings including the human being? Does the meaning of life consist mainly in man's ability to identify his potentials and to go after inherent possibilities without recourse to other existents that were supposed to be a part of the web of existence?

The Ontology of life

It should be noted that Ibrahim is among several philosophers that have made effort to situate the meaning of life and man's place in the web of reality. The study of being, existence and reality is a branch of metaphysics known as ontology. Ontology deals with the nature of existence, the meaning and nature of being and the notion of reality. It tries to answer the questions "what does it mean to exist as a human being? What is the nature of reality and what constitutes human existence? The answer to these questions come in different philosophical schools of thought that includes existentialism, materialism, social constructivism and dualism. Existentialist holds the view that existence precedes essence, and that human beings creates their own individual meaning of life. Social constructivism on the other holds the view that human existence is shaped by social and cultural constructs, that reality is constructed through interactions and shared meaning. In other words, the meaning of life and existence can and should be located within the cultural context of the human being. A culture's shared notion of reality determines the meaning an individual member of a particular culture makes out of life, his potentialities and possibilities notwithstanding. Jim Una in his Inaugural Lecture aligns with this thought when he talked about the radical ontology of man. According to him "the ontology of man investigates how we form notions, images, ideas, concepts and how these notions, images, ideas and concepts are applied in things, how they translate into words in form of communication of discourse and how understanding of what is communicated actually takes place. It is about how ideas and concepts are generated to affect our experience and add value to the world. All these according to him are achieved by the act of finite transcendence. Transcendence is the projection of the mind into nothingness: it portrays thought as the locomotive of existence (13).

The deduction from Una is that ideas, images and concepts are finite transcendental projections from one's cultural background and these projected images, concepts and ideas are the locomotives or vehicles through which people make meaning of life and out of life. Thus, the meaning of life to an individual is solely dependent on what was projected into the nothingness of his being that manifests into his construed reality. In other words, the meaning of life is dependent on an individual's interpretation of the images, ideas and notions projected into his being first by his culture, society, associations and then, convictions.

Conclusion

Among the duties of philosophers is finding answers to difficult questions that agitate the minds of human beings. The question of the meaning of life is one of such very difficult questions. Dr.



Ibrahim Adekunle in his attempt to give his own answer to the meaning of life introduced the notion of Synergetic Specialism where he opined that nothing exists for nothing and that reality is a web of speciated units with cross-functional necessity and concluded that the meaning of life is not in a divine purpose, neither in transcendent metaphysical end, nor in nothingness but in a synergetic engagement of endowments. The paper disagreed with Ibrahim on many fronts including the point that ‘existence is not by chance but out of necessity’. It is the opinion of this paper that existence is by chance and not of necessity.

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