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One of the major concerns of existentialists is the question of authentic existence. Oscar Wilde, a famous Irish poet and playwright, whose literary works contain lots of philosophical nuances, also battled with the concept of authentic living. The paper is therefore an attempt to identify his concept of authentic existence or living in comparison with other existential philosophers. The work is qualitative research sourcing its data from various library materials with application of and hermeneutics and comparison. The finding of this work is that authentic living, for Oscar Wilde, means self-actualization, which is more comprehensive than the position of many existential philosophers. Linus Akudolu: oluchukwu1900@gmail.com

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Authentic Living in Existential Philosophy: A Hermeneutic Identification of Oscar Wilde's Position

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Abstract

One of the major concerns of existentialists is the question of authentic existence. Oscar Wilde, a famous Irish poet and playwright, whose literary works contain lots of philosophical nuances, also battled with the concept of authentic living. The paper is therefore an attempt to identify his concept of authentic existence or living in comparison with other existential philosophers. The work is qualitative research sourcing its data from various library materials with application of and hermeneutics and comparison. The finding of this work is that authentic living, for Oscar Wilde, means self-actualization, which is more comprehensive than the position of many existential philosophers.

Key Words: Existentialism, Oscar Wilde, socialism, authentic living, authentic existence, self-actualization





1. Introduction

To 'live' and to 'exist' are often taken to be synonymous, but not to Oscar Wilde, who says: "To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all" (Wilde, 2012:12). What is to live and what is to exist? What is the difference between authentic existence and inauthentic existence? In what situation can one be said to live, otherwise he merely exists not living authentically? This is indeed one of the major problems that burdened the minds of many existentialists including Jean Paul Sartre, Soren Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Schopenhauer among others (Sartre, 1992; Kierkegaard, 1971; Heidegger, 2010; Hubscher, 2022). Oscar Wilde (16th October 1854-30th November 1900), a famous Irish poet and playwright, whose literary works contain lots of philosophical nuances and existential discourses, also battled with the concept of authentic living. Though he did not write a special volume on the topic, he treated it conversely as he advocated for socialism in his social and political treaty, *The Soul of Man under socialism*. What we want to do here is a hermeneutic interpretation of the text with the aim of identifying his concept of authentic living. But before doing so, we have to review the positions of some prominent existentialists on the subject so that we can compare and contrast theirs with his position. In other words, this work is qualitative research, with *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, serving as a primary source of data, and other library materials secondary, with application of and hermeneutics and comparison.

2. Authentic Living in Existentialism

Existentialism is a form of philosophical tradition that explores the problems of human existence, his feelings, thinking, and acting (Macquarrie, 1972; Stumpf 1994). They discuss the meaning of human existence, value of existing and what it means to exist. Their common observation is that human experience in the world which is meaningless and absurd is characterized by despair, angst, anxiety, dread and confusion. In the midst of these problems, what does it mean to exist? Though their views differ, what they have in common is the belief that existence precedes essence; one must first exist, confront the problems of existence and then define his existence (Sartre, 1992; Kierkegaard, 1971; Heidegger, 2010; Hubscher, 2022). Since they are concerned with existence, one of their major themes is authentic living, which is authentic existence in their term, otherwise the person merely exists. Let us review how some of them tackled the issue.

2.1 Jean Paul Sartre

Jean Paul Sartre (1992) conceives authentic existence in terms of making use of one's freedom and choice. He begins his existential philosophy by arguing against essentialism which holds that essence precedes existence. What does it mean to say that essence precedes existence? This implies that a thing has essence before it is created physically. Before a paper knife is created, the manufacturer has a conception of it in his mind: the shape, the color, the size and the purpose. Sartre argues that human nature cannot be described in the same way that we



describe the article of manufacture. To differentiate human beings from other things, he talks about being-in-itself (*l'en-soi*) and being-for-itself (*le pour-soi*) (Stumpf, 1994: 513). Applying this distinction to humanity, Sartre explains that man shares these two modes of being, the *en-soi* indicates that he or she is the way stone is, while *pour-soi* indicates that he or she is a conscious subject, which differentiates him from stone and other articles of manufacture. To be a conscious subject is to stand constantly before the future (Stumpf, 1994: 513). Man, according to him, therefore exists before he defines his essence. This is based on his atheism, that there is no God that stands in relation as manufacture stands in relation to the paper knife. Since God does not exist, man will first of all exist and chose his essence: "The most important consequences of placing existence before essence in human nature is not only that people create themselves but that people's responsibility for their existence rests squarely upon each person" (Stumpf, 1994:513). Whatever man is is by his choice and not by any God outside him since such a God does not exist. He insists that it is self-deception for one to shift his responsibility and blame some other forces outside him, but authentic living means confronting situations of life through making choices and commitment. But to rely on self-deception is inauthentic living (for more information on sartres' existentialism see Sartre, 1992; Stumpf, 1994)

2.2 Soren Kierkegaard

Soren Kierkegaard (1971) upholds that choice and commitment are keys to authentic existence, and not authentic existence itself. According to him, human life is full of despair, guilt and angst. This according to him is as a result of alienation from God by sin. Sin alienates us from God. Therefore, humankind's essential nature entails its relation to God, the infinite. Authentic living for man is a life of fulfillment which is only possible when one enters into a good relationship with his Maker (Stumpf, 1994: 384). Until one does actualize one's essential self in God, says Kierkegaard, one's life is full of anxiety. One's anxiety is caused by one's awareness, however obscure, of deep alienation of one's existential self from one's essential self. This alienation creates in one a dynamic drive to recover one's essential self.

Describing the process of this dynamic movement back to God, Kierkegaard speaks of three stages of human development. The first stage is what he called aesthetic life. Aesthetic stage is the lowest stage where life is controlled by pleasure. Man at this stage is sensuous. Though existence can be achieved at this stage, Kierkegaard injects elements of quality into the matter of existence, calling this kind of existence inauthentic existence. Awareness of inauthentic living in this stage creates in the person a conflict, either to leave this stage or to remain in the "cellar"(Stumpf, 1994: 485) The decision to move to the next stage cannot be achieved by thinking alone but by making decision, or by act of will, and by a commitment

The second stage is the ethical stage. At this stage, the individual has accepted to live by moral laws and values. But often finds himself violating the laws and resolutions he has made for himself. He finds out that he is doing something more than merely making mistakes. The ethical person consequently comes to the realization that he is in fact incapable of fulfilling



the moral laws, that he deliberately violates the moral laws, and therefore becomes conscious of his guilt. Guilt or the sense of sin becomes the dialectic element, the antithesis that places a new *either or*. He must either remain at this stage and be suffering the guilt and anxiety or respond positively by moving to a new stage. Movement from this stage to next cannot be achieved by thinking alone but through commitment and leap of faith.

At the third stage, the individual, through act of commitment and faith, resigns his inabilities to God. He becomes one with God through faith. He does not sin but even when he sins, he confesses his sins and believes in God's love and forgiveness (Akudolu, 2020). It is at this stage that one can boast of authentic living (for more details see Kierkegaard 1971; Stumpf, 1994; Connel, 2022; Hong 2022).

2.3 Schopenhauer

For Schopenhauer (Hubscher, 2022), authentic living entails one's ability to escape from the overpowering force of "Will", through asceticism, the denial of other passions and desire, and through aesthetic contemplation of artistry. How did he arrive at this? He arrived at this through a systematic analysis of his popular paradox: "The world is my idea, the world is will, and the world is evil" (Stumpf, 1994: 347-3480). According to Schopenhauer, "the world is my idea" means that the world is our perception of "what is out there". Using the German word "Vorstellung" literally meaning anything that is "set in front of" or "placed before" or that is a "presentation" (p.3480). Schopenhauer refers to everything that is placed before or presented to our consciousness or understanding, so that the world as an idea or my idea refers not only to what we think about (i.e. ideas in the narrow view) but equally to what we hear, feel, or perceive in various ways. There is no other object out there besides what we perceive or as Schopenhauer says "The whole actual, active world is determined as such through the understanding and apart from it is nothing". The world presents itself to a person as an object to a subject, and "we as subjects know only the world we perceive" and thus "the whole world of objects is and remains my idea" (347-348).

According to Schopenhauer, the world is also "will". His use of "will" is quite different from ordinary use of it as conscious and deliberate choice to behave in a certain way. According to him, the ultimate reality, the noumenal reality, is the Will to live. The world of appearance, the physical universe, is a self-projection of the will to live, for underlying everything in the universe is the will striving endlessly for sustenance of life and existence by blind and irresistible impulse.

That the world is evil is the ground of Schopenhauer pessimism. Human freedom is nothing but a result of driving force in man. All things are like puppets "set in motion by internal clockwork". The assumption that human beings are superior to other lower animals due to rationality is rejected by Schopenhauer as both are controlled by internal drive in nature to produce and maintain life. In the process of maintaining life in nature, some lives are trampled upon and some used as sacrifices to sustain life in nature. Schopenhauer sees human life as



miserable, full of pain and suffering. There is nothing to enjoy in life except satisfaction of our appetite, sex and momentary comforts. Apart from these, life to him is a bad bargain as the inputs made to maintain it is greater than the reward. According to him, there can be no true happiness in life as happiness entails needs, and needs if not satisfied brings pain. The only way to escape the suffering and pain of life is through escape from the “will. How can one escape the overpowering force of the “Will”? He answers through asceticism by which one sees the world as illusion *maya* and be disenchanted in the things of the world, and through aesthetic contemplation (for more details, see Stumpf, 1994, Huscher, 2022).

2.4 Martin Heidegger

Martin Heidegger (2010) seeks the meaning of authentic living through his analysis of the concept of *Dasein*. According to Martin Heidegger, the word “humans” can be very deceptive because in the history of humanity, the definitions of humanity have tended to resemble the definitions of things. Taking seriously the meaning of the Greek word *phenomenon* as “that which reveals itself”, he believed that if we let our human experience reveal itself, that our understanding of humanity would be quite different from conventional conception of humanity. Heidegger therefore coined a new word *Dasein* to describe the condition of human existence so as to differentiate it from other things. *Dasein* is a German word simply meaning “being there” (Stumpf, 1994:504). Human beings like other things were not consulted before he was created but found himself thrown into the world. He is aware of its existence. He is aware of his “being there”. A human is best described as a unique mode of being rather defined as an object. You cannot define *Dasein’s* essence by pointing to “what of the kind” that pertains to an object. A person as a *Dasein* or “being there” is a continuous being, who thinks about the meaning of everything that is, not for any particular result, but because he or she is “a thinking, that is amusing being”. If then we ask, what is the essence of humanity, the answer lies not in some attributes or properties but rather in how people exist. Unlike the being of things, the being of humanity includes an awareness of its being and the being of others. Only human beings, according to him, can raise the question about their existence and that of others. Human beings exist and assign meaning to their existence and the existence of other things. It also assigns purposes to other things.

More so, unlike other things, human beings have a relation to their own being, because only people find themselves as “thrown into the world” and as having to choose how to live. Also, only a person has such an urgent experience of anxiety, fear, care, and a concern about death. These and other human experiences, according to Heidegger, leads a person to ask not only the limited question about his or her own being but also the larger question of what it means to be. He identifies three basic structures of *Dasein*: understanding, mood and discourse. By understanding, we mean *Dasein’s* capacity to project meaning and assign purposes to existence. By mood, we mean *Dasein’s* manner of existence whether happy, despair, fear etc. By discourse, we mean *Dasein’s* capacity to communicate through speech unlike other things.



If we now ask him, what does it mean for a human being to be? What is authentic living for a human person; we must recall everything he said above about *Dasein*. We are not consulted before we are created, we are thrown down, our life is short, we cannot evade the inevitability of our limited existence. As *Dasein*, each of us is situated here and now in the present facing future possibilities, with many moods, especially anxiety. Our authentic existence therefore requires us to recognize and affirm our own unique selves with our responsibility for every action. A person drifts into an inauthentic existence when he tries to escape from oneself by finding refuge in a public self; when you begin to blame other things other than yourself. His concept of authentic living therefore resembles that of Sartre who emphasizes choice and responsibility (for more details, see Heidegger, 2010; Stumpf, 1994; Capobianco, 2010).

3. Authentic Living in Oscar Wilde's Social Philosophy

As a scholar who is concerned with existential issues of human life, Oscar Wilde followed suit in discussing what is 'authentic living' through his discourse on socialism, which he expounded in his social and political treatises, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*. Oscar Wilde advocates abolition of capitalist economy for socialism as capitalism makes it impossible for people to actualize the talents in them. He begins the main part of the book by revealing the advantage of socialism over capitalism: "The chief advantage that would result from establishment of socialism is undoubtedly, the fact that socialism would relieve us from that sordid necessity of living for others which in present condition of things, press so hardly upon almost everybody" (Wilde, 2012:7). One of the greatest problems of capitalism is the struggle to escape from poverty, making people do all manner of things to escape from it. Both the rich and the poor are not spared.

Oscar argues against using welfare to solve the problems of poverty created by capitalism. According to him, instead of channeling their resources and time to realizing their true talents, they waste them trying to solve the social problems caused by capitalism, without taking their common cause away. Thus, caring people "seriously and very sentimentally set themselves to the task of remedying the evils that they see in poverty but their remedies do not cure the disease: they merely prolong it" because, as Wilde puts it, "the proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible" (p.7). He did not see kindness or altruism as the major but as a limitation against carrying out this aim. Trying to solve the problem of poverty by trying to keep the poor alive is amusing. But with-with the abolition of private property, then, "we shall have true, beautiful, healthy individualism. Nobody will waste his life in accumulating things, and the symbols for things", but channel his efforts in actualizing his potential. It is only when one is developing the potential in him that one can be said to be living authentic life (Wilde, 2012:12).



Emphasizing more on the importance of socialism in self-actualization, he writes:

Socialism, communism or whatever one chooses to call it, by converting private property into public wealth, and substituting co-operation for competition, will restore society to its proper condition of a thoroughly healthy organism, and insure the material well-being of each member of the community. It will in fact, give life its proper environment. But for full development of life to its highest mode of perfection, something more is needed. What is needed is individualism (Wilde 2012:8).

Therefore, Wilde's deepest concern was with man's soul; when he analyzed poverty and its causes and effects in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" it was not simply the material well-being of the poor that distressed him, but how society does not allow them to reach a form of self-understanding and enlightenment. He adopted Jesus of Nazareth as a symbol of the supreme individualist (p.13) Wilde advocated socialism, which, he argued, "will be of value simply because it will lead to individualism" and "substituting competition for cooperation will restore society to its proper condition ... and ensure material well-being for each member of the community".

It is this condition that is needed for the development of individualism. By individualism, Wilde means developing that thing in you that gives you pleasure. "Wilde is therefore not so much bordered about material well-being of the poor rather eulogizes the hypothetical life of artists in a socialist society where private property is abolished" (Jacques, 2021). He is more concerned about the political conditions necessary for this full self-development and devotion to art.

From the discussion so far, it is obvious that authentic living for Oscar Wilde has to do with the development of innate abilities in man, and not something outside. He argues that "Nothing should be able to harm a man except himself. Nothing should be able to rob a man at all. What a man really has is what is in him. What is outside of him should be a matter of no importance" (Wilde 2012:12). In other words, authentic existence is self-actualization, self-realization and self-development.

4. Comparative Analysis

Oscar Wilde, by his new concept of authentic living adds something totally different and better than the positions of existentialists, by identifying self-actualization as authentic living. Man is created for a purpose. There is why you are created otherwise God would not have needed to create you. To live authentically is therefore to identify, develop, pursue and fulfil the purpose of your existence. Wilde therefore seeks a conducive atmosphere for achieving this by advocating socialism in place of capitalism as capitalism restraints us from this purpose. Socialism offers more freedom and opportunity for this self-actualization and realization. Wilde like Sartre, Soren Kierkegaard and Heidegger emphasizes on freedom as enabling environment to live, but differs from them as authentic living for him involves utilizing the freedom for self-actualization, while for Sartre, Kierkegaard and Heidegger, it is freedom



to making choices and Kierkegaard adds it faith. This is because of his Christian inclination and belief that without God, our efforts can be futile. He believes that without a relationship with God, one cannot boast of authentic living (Akudolu, 2020). It is only in this condition that one has hope even in crisis, fulfillment amidst his weakness and strength in the hurdles of life.

Schopenhauer differs so much from others as he urges us to evade the overpowering force of the will. He advocates for an escape, which is a form of self-denial. Can one really escape from the overpowering force of the will? Stumpf (1994: 351) observes that “any escape from it can be temporary.” Schopenhauer therefore becomes a victim of Sartre’s self-deception by trying to escape from the “will”.

5. Conclusion

From the above analysis, it is observed that Wilde’s conception of authentic living though different in approach resembles other existentialists in their emphasis on the importance of freedom as enabling environment for authentic living. Capitalism therefore for Wilde restrains the freedom for self-actualization and development. But with the abolition of capitalism and its replacement with socialism, one would be freer from the sordid of life to pursue his individualism. By individualism, he means moving human potentials to actuality. It is only in this condition that one can say to be “living truly”. He then observes that the majority of people in the world do not live in the actual sense of living. Their existence is therefore inauthentic: “One will live. To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all” (Wilde, 2012:12). Oscar Wilde, by this understanding of authentic living, emphasis on human freedom, and concern on human existence can be qualified as an existentialist. He is more existentialist than some existentialist like Schopenhauer who advocates escapes from “will” as a solution to the problems of life. Though his existentialism in socialism has lots of internal contradictions, his emphasis on inward development as authentic living is commendable.



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