THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT:
HAS HUMAN LIFE ON EARTH ANY ULTIMATE PURPOSE,
ANY ULTIMATE MEANING? - AN EXISTENTIAL INQUIRY

By

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(Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam)

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To God alone and not to any man, let all glory be given for whatever he has enabled me to achieve; I owe my life, my education, everything I am and everything I have to my Creator who sent His Son to me, to save me, to tell me why He created me, why I am in this world, why I live, what I am supposed to do, where I am coming from, and where I am going to. He gave me a new birth and a new life, by the power of His Holy Spirit whom He also sent to me and who is at work in me. I thank Him for everything I am, everything I have, and everything that happens to me.

In 1957 when I was in primary 5, on the advice of a Rev. Father, I ran away from home and ran to the Catholic mission in Benin City, because I was being forced to worship (juju) idols at home. Right from that time God took care of me and my education through the Catholic Church. All my education from that time onward was in Catholic Institutions – St. Theresa’s Catholic School, Okokhuo, St. Paul’s Junior Seminary, Benin City, SS. Peter & Paul Major Seminary, Ibadan, Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, Pontifical Lateran University, Rome, and Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium.

I thank the Catholic Church for my education. The Church has always promoted education all over the world. I thank the University of Lagos for providing me with the opportunity to do my research. I thank my colleagues in my Department for the help and support I got from them all these years we have been working together, helping one another.
1. THE RELEVANCE OF PHILOSOPHY TO PRACTICAL LIFE

There is a general misconception of philosophy according to which philosophy is an abstract discipline which has no relevance to practical life and influences nothing beyond itself. The Anglo-Saxon analytic tradition lends support to this misconception by reducing philosophy to analysis alone. Analysis is indeed part of philosophy but it is only a means to an end, not the end itself. As it has been conceived and developed in the West through the Ages, philosophy has played a vital role in the development of society.

The philosophy of Socrates was by no means irrelevant to the Athenian society. On the contrary, the Athenian authorities noticed that the philosophy of Socrates was influencing the lives of the Athenian youth and they took steps to stop it by putting the philosopher to death. The philosophy of Plato and the Stoics had tremendous influence on the lives of millions of men in the post-Aristotelian period, especially during the Hellenistic period. It led to an ascetic attitude resulting in the renunciation of material possessions which were seen as sources of unhappiness. This philosophy led millions of people to the conviction that the more a man amasses material possessions the more unhappy he becomes. The philosophies of John Locke, Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, were among the forces that shaped the Western society. The philosophical theories of John Locke, for example, "are embedded in the American Constitutions, and are to be seen at work whenever there is a dispute between the President and Congress. The British Constitution was based upon his doctrines until about fifty years ago, and so was that which the French adopted in 1871" (Russell, 1961: 585). The
philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "the father of the French Revolution," was the moving force behind the French Revolution. His famous book, *The Social Contract*, with its forceful key assertion that "Man is born free and is everywhere in chains" was the source of inspiration for the French Revolutionaries. Who says philosophy is irrelevant to practical life? The Hegelian-Marxist philosophy changed the structures of societies and the lives of millions of people in socialist countries for decades in our own time. "To understand an age or a nation we must understand its philosophy" says Bertrand Russell, because the philosophy of a people does much to determine the circumstances of their lives (Bertrand Russell, 1961:11). For centuries the lives of the Indian people were shaped by the Hindu, Buddhist and Jainist philosophies. The same can be said about the Chinese whose lives have been shaped for centuries by their philosophies – Taoism and Confucianism. To understand the cultures and ways of life of these people, you have to study their philosophies.

It is an illusion, indeed a dangerous illusion, to think that philosophical ideas have no influence on practical life. Philosophical ideas are dynamites. They have powerful influences on people's lives. In the 4th century B.C., a philosopher by name Hegesias, a member of the Cyrenaic school, delivered series of lectures at Alexandria in Egypt. After each lecture, a number of people who listened to him went later to commit suicide. As the series of lectures progressed the rate of suicide began to increase until the government of the day intervened and stopped the lectures (see. Armstrong, 1965:117; F. Copleston 1962:143). "The people make a laughing stock of the philosopher as a person harmlessly absorbed in his ideas," says I. M. Bochenski (1769:viii), "though really he is a terrifying force and his thought has the effect of dynamite"... "Despite its apparent unimportance, philosophy is even a powerful force in history."
2. WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

It is a well known fact among philosophers that philosophy has no universally accepted definition, that is, a definition acceptable to all philosophers. There are as many definitions of philosophy as there are schools of philosophy. Every philosopher defines philosophy from the point of view of his own school of philosophy. For example, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1961:49) of the analytic school, defines philosophy as “The logical clarification of thought.” Martin Heidegger (1965:115), the ontologist, sees philosophy as the search for “the Being of Being”. Jacques Maritain (1965:132), the neo-thomist defines philosophy as the science that studies “the highest principles of all things.” A. J. Ayer, another member of the analytic school, (1974:37) disagrees with Jacques Maritain and says that philosophy is not the search for principles. “Philosophy is an activity of analysis.” Bertrand Russell (1959:1), the best known British philosophy in the 20th century, sees philosophy as an “attempt to answer ultimate questions, not uncritically and dogmatically as we do in ordinary life and even in the sciences, but critically after exploring all that makes such questions puzzling, and after realising all the vagueness and confusion that underlie our ordinary ideas.” Bertrand Russell places philosophy between theology and science. “Like theology, it consists of speculations on matters as to which definite knowledge has, so far, been unascertainable, but like science, it appeals to human reasoning rather than authority, whether that of tradition or that of revelation ... Almost all questions of interest to speculative minds are such as science cannot answer... The study of such questions ... is the business of philosophy.” While philosophers of the empirico-materialist school restrict the scope of philosophy to only empirically observable phenomena, those of the rationalist–idealist school extend the scope to cover all realities, both visible and invisible, material and immaterial, so long as they are objects of thought.
It may seem strange to non-philosophers that professional philosophers disagree among themselves on the nature and scope of their own discipline. But an understanding of the nature of philosophy shows that disagreement about the nature and scope of philosophy is itself part of philosophy. For philosophy is a critical discipline which applies its critical tool to itself. Hence, criticism and disagreement are part of philosophy. Besides being a critical discipline, philosophy is fundamentally a reflective activity making use of logic and analysis. It is basically a reflection on human experience of reality, in search of meaning. It is a search for the meaning of reality in general and of human life in particular. Hence, it can focus its search light on reality in general, on the universe, or on human life.

Western philosophy began in Greece in the 6th century B.C. The early Greek philosophers (the Ionians) focused their attention on the universe, trying to understand the universe, particularly in terms of the unity and diversity of things, the change and continuity observable in it. They were struck by the basic unity in the midst of amazing diversity, the continuity in the midst of ceaseless changes in the universe and they began to reflect on these. They eventually came to the conclusion that all the things in the universe were ultimately made of one stuff and that the only permanent thing in the universe was change. They however disagreed on what the one stuff was. They were cosmologists because they directed their philosophical reflection on the cosmos. When, however, Socrates came to the scene in the 4th century B.C., he changed the direction of Greek Philosophy from the cosmos to the human person. Philosophers like St. Augustine, Blaise Pascal, and, especially, Soren Kierkegaard eventually followed in the footsteps of Socrates. Consequently, they made the human person, human existence, the focal point of their philosophical inquiries. Kierkegaard, the "father of existentialism" criticised Hegel's philosophy for giving little or no place to the human person. Instead, Hegel focused all his
attention on the Absolute Spirit around which his philosophy revolves. What about the human person? Kierkegaard believes that philosophy should be centred on the human person, his existence with all its problems and constraints.

3. THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT

The human person is the most marvellous and most complex being in the universe. The marvels of the human person by far surpass those of the physical universe. Thus, there is a richer source of philosophy in the human person than in the physical universe. The brevity of human life, the vicissitudes of life, man's power and weakness, his dignity and misery, his joys and sorrows, his finitude, his experience of suffering, sickness, disease, death and decay, his anxieties, fears and worries, are all starting points for philosophy. Buddha's philosophy, for example, arose from his reflection on human suffering — old age, disease, death and decay. Reflection on these phenomena of human life gives rise to some fundamental questions about the nature, purpose and meaning of human life on earth. What is man? He is so strong, yet so fragile, so powerful, yet so weak, so great, yet so miserable. He is so curious to know, and knows so much about the physical universe, yet he is so ignorant about himself. He is in fact a problem to himself, a mystery beyond his comprehension. He cannot answer his own questions about himself. From time immemorial, man has been asking himself basic questions about his origin, nature and destiny.

What am I? Why do I live? What is the meaning of my life? What, in the final analysis, is the ultimate value of my life? Where do I go from here? Am I heading for nothingness (Marcel, 1955:14). There are, of course, many people who do not bother asking themselves such questions about the meaning and purpose of their lives. They just go on from day to day living unexamined lives. They work, eat, drink, struggle for money and wealth, marry, and beget children. They just want to be like "others" and they are 'submerged' in their daily
routine, without ever asking themselves what it all means in the final analysis (Leep, 1969:0.23). Man is a being who does not understand himself, a being who feels alienated from himself, and puts his own very being into question.

Man has a natural desire for continued existence, his strongest instinct is that of self-preservation, self-perpetuation in existence. Yet his life span is brief and is often terminated contrary to his deepest desire. All his efforts to resist this imposed termination of his life are futile – off he goes whether he likes it or not. He is forced out of this world without even knowing where he is going. He did not choose to come into this world. He simply finds himself in it without knowing why and sooner or later he will be forced out of it. That is why the scholastic philosophers described man as a contingent being whose existence is not necessary. A contingent being is, according to the scholastics, a being who does not have within itself sufficient reason for its existence. It does not have to exist, it may exist, it may not exist. Some years ago it did not exist, and some years to come it will not exist any more. It comes into existence and goes out of it without knowing why it comes or why it goes or where it is going. It is not responsible for its own existence, either for coming into existence or for going out of it. What purpose does its existence serve? It does not know. Yes, man is such a being, a contingent being. That is why Jean-Paul Sartre (1969:79) describes man as a being in whose being, being itself is in question, a being who puts his own being into question. Yes, man is the being that puts his own very being into question. What is the ultimate meaning of his existence? What is the ultimate value of his life? What is he living for? Has his life any ultimate meaning? We all know that we eat to live, but what do we live to do? Why do we live?

Albert Camus (1975:11) tells us that there is only one truly serious philosophical question, i.e., is human life meaningful or meaningless? This is also the most serious problem about human life.
There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest - whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories - come afterwards. Whether the earth or the sun revolves round the other, is a matter of profound indifference. To tell the truth, it is a futile question. On the other hand, I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living.

Albert Camus is quite right. Many people do commit suicide because they find life meaningless. They feel that a meaningless life is not worth living. They therefore terminate it.

"What a chimera is man", exclaims the French philosopher, Pascal (1966:237-52), "a bundle of contradiction". He is great, but at the same time weak and miserable, with insatiable desires. Man is the greatest being in the universe, yet he is so fragile that a little thing, just one bullet, for example, can destroy him. He is wretched but he is great even in his wretchedness because he knows his wretchedness. The fact that he is aware of his wretchedness shows that he knows that he ought to be more than he actually is. He knows that he is not really his true self, that he used to be more than he is at present. In other words, man is aware of his fallen state. It is only a deposed king that feels unhappy about his state of not being a king. If he had never been a king at all he would not feel unhappy about his not being a king. Yes, man is a "deposed king", a fallen creature, longing to be restored to his former dignity. In a similar way, Jean-Paul Sartre, describes man as a being who is not what he is and who is what he is not, a being who carries a vacuum, an emptiness within him at the heart of his being. He says man is empty inside him, he feels this emptiness at the heart of his being.
and this makes him always dissatisfied, restless and unhappy. Man's whole life and activities are aimed at filling this emptiness inside him. But it is a waste of time; every effort to fill this vacuum is futile because it is part of the ontological structure of man's being. It has its origin in the nothingness which is the ontological foundation of man's being. It is this nothingness which separates man from himself and manifests itself as an emptiness at the heart of his being. That is why man is by his very nature a restless being, a dissatisfied being. Nothing can satisfy him as long as he carries that vacuum inside him at the heart of his being. No amount of money, no amount of wealth, wine or women can satisfy man's deepest yearning because nothing can fill the vacuum inside him. This means that all his endeavours in life to acquire wealth are futile. "Man is a useless passion", Sartre (1969:78, 79) concludes. Expressing similar ideas about man's dissatisfaction and restlessness, Augustine (1974:21) says to God: "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you".

Augustine who, in his youth, lived a care-free life later learnt from experience that nothing can satisfy the deepest yearning of the human heart. The Jewish philosopher has more to tell us about this, from his personal experience. "Life is useless, all useless," he says. "You spend your life working, labouring and what do you have to show for it?" (Ecclesiastes, chs. 1 and 2). "I decided to enjoy myself and find out what happiness is. But I found that this is useless too ... that pleasure does you no good ... I decided to cheer myself up with wine and have a good time. I thought that this might be the best way people can spend their short lives on earth. I accomplished great things. I built many houses ... I also piled up silver and gold from the royal treasuries of the lands I ruled. Men and women sang to entertain me and I had all the women a man could want ... Yes I was great, greater than
anyone else who had ever lived in Jerusalem ... Anything I wanted I got. I did not deny myself any pleasure. I was proud of everything I had worked for, and all this was my reward. Then I thought about all I had done and how hard I had worked doing it, and I realised that it didn’t mean a thing. It was like chasing the wind – of no use at all ... So life came to mean nothing to me because everything in it had brought me nothing but trouble. It had all been useless; I had been chasing the wind ... It is all useless ... You work and worry your way through life, and what do you have to show for it... It is all useless. It is like chasing the wind” (Ecclesiastes, Chs. 1 and 2).

Buddha also teaches us a similar lesson from his personal experience, like the Jewish philosopher. He was a prince, born into wealth in a royal palace and brought up in the luxury of the royal court. He was the only son of his father, a king who had long been looking for a male child before Buddha was born. The birth of this long awaited son filled the king with joy and he determined to give his son a really royal upbringing, with maximum pleasure, and no suffering. He saw his son as destined to succeed him on the royal throne. He brought forty thousand dancing girls to his son, to entertain him and enjoy himself with. He got a wife for him at the early age of 16, a princess from a neighbouring kingdom. With forty thousand dancing girls at his disposal, to enjoy himself with, Buddha knew what pleasure and wealth meant. But, like the Jewish philosopher he discovered that it was all useless, meaningless, like the chasing of the wind. He saw the whole thing as an illusion, and at the age of 29, he left the palace, left his father, his wife and his only son, left all his dancing girls, and went into the forest to become a monk (Omoregbe, 1999: 99-132).

In his *Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus illustrates in a dramatic way the futility of all human endeavours and the absurdity of human existence. He compares human existence
to the life of Sisyphus who spent all his life rolling a heavy stone up a high hill. He would start early in the morning rolling the stone up the hill and spend the whole day rolling it, exerting all his energy and perspiring profusely all over his body. When at last he succeeded in rolling it to the top of the hill, the stone would roll down the hill, and Sisyphus would come down and start all over rolling the stone up the hill again, exerting all his energy as before. And when again he succeeded in reaching the top of the hill with the stone, it would again roll down the hill. Sisyphus kept doing this everyday of his life until he died. He worked very hard, but what did he achieve in the end? Nothing. What was the meaning of what he spent his whole life doing? What was the purpose? It had no meaning, no purpose, it was a totally absurd exercise. He lived a meaningless life. Albert Camus tells us that human life on earth is no less absurd than that of Sisyphus. It is as meaningless as that of Sisyphus (Camus, 1975:105). We wake up in the morning, brush our teeth, take our bath, take our breakfast, dress up and go out struggling for one thing or another – money, food, wealth, etc. We struggle the whole day and come back home in the evening to sleep. The following morning, we wake up, go through the routine again, brush out teeth; take our bath; take our breakfast; dress up and we are out again struggling till evening. We come back home again in the evening, to sleep, and wake up again the following morning, doing the same thing all over, and this goes on everyday, until we eventually die, and it is all over. What have we achieved in the end? Nothing. What, in the final analysis, are we going to do with all the money, all the wealth we spend all our life struggling to acquire? Nothing. We shall leave them behind when we die and go to the grave. How is our life better than that of Sisyphus? How is it more meaningful or less absurd than that of Sisyphus? “It is absurd that we are born, it is absurd that we die”, says Jean-Paul Sartre (1969: 545).
4. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

The most disturbing problem that makes human life appear meaningless is the problem of evil. This is a problem that has plagued human life from its very beginning and has disturbed the human mind from time immemorial. It has become an insoluble problem, a puzzle, and in fact, a mystery, to the human mind. Evil can be categorised into two kinds, namely, moral evil and natural evil. Moral evil is any wrongdoing deliberately carried out by somebody, especially if such an act adversely affects another person's well being. Natural evil is any natural event which brings pain, disaster or suffering, physically or mentally, on human beings, such as earthquakes, flood disasters, fire outbreak, drought, hunger, disease, sickness, accident, mental or physical deformity, death, etc. It is natural evil in particular that leads one to ask whether human life has any meaning at all, or any purpose. A visit, for example, to a home for mentally retarded children or physically handicapped children, disabled people, paralytics, terminally sick people in great pain, or a mortuary, prompts one to ask whether human life has any meaning at all. This was what led Job to curse the day he was born. He wished he had died as soon as he was born. "Why did my mother bring me into this world? He wondered why God allows men to go on living in misery.

"Why let men go on living in misery? ... They wait for death, but it never comes" (Job Ch.3). Not only did Jeremiah curse the day he was born, he even cursed the person who brought the news of his birth to his father. "Why was I born? Cursed be the day I was born! Cursed be the man who made my father glad when he brought him the news, "It is a boy! You have a son" (Jeremiah Chs. 15:10; 20:14-18).

The absurdity of human existence and the futility of all human struggles dawns on one also at funerals or interment. As the coffin is lowered into the grave it dawns on one that it is all over for the deceased, that this is the final end of all his struggles, all his endeavours, all his wealth, and that the very
same fate awaits us all. The problem of evil is the most perplexing problem to theists who believe that this world was created by the infinitely good and Omnipotent God. It is the most serious problem to monotheists. How do we reconcile human suffering, human misery with the infinite goodness and infinite power of God? This problem has agitated the mind of philosophers from the period of the Ancient Greeks to our own day. The Ancient Greek philosopher, Epicurus said it was impossible to reconcile these two attributes of God (Infinite goodness and Infinite power) with the stark reality of evil in the world. He puts it in the form of a dilemma. It is either God is infinitely good and wants to remove evil from the world but is unable to do so (in which case he is not infinitely powerful) or he is able to remove it but does not want to do so (in which case he is not infinitely good). If he wants to remove evil from the world and he is able to do so, why has he not done so? Why does he allow human beings to suffer, if he really wants to stop their suffering and is well able to do so? Why is evil still in the world? (Omoregbe, 1993:134-158). What escaped Epicurus, however, is the possibility that human suffering could, in a way known to God alone, lead to some good, indeed a greater good, which could explain why God does not want to remove it even though he is able to do so. He has the power to bring good out of evil. In the same way David Hume the Scottish philosopher says,

“If the maker of this world can do all things, if he can do whatever he wills then he does not will man’s happiness. Neither men nor animals are happy. The course of nature tends not to make men happy. The whole earth ... is cursed and polluted”. Hume goes further to remind us that men come into this world in tears, suffer all through life and finally leave it in agony. “The first entrance into life gives anguish to the new born infant and its wretched parents. Weakness attend each stage of that life, and it is at last finished in agony and horror” (Hume, 1947:x).
Reasoning along the same line, John Stuart Mill (1964:115) says: “If the maker of this world can do all that he wants, he wills misery, and there is no escape from this conclusion”. In his popular novel, The Plague, Albert Camus (1961:240), expressing his view through the mouth of Dr. Rieux, the main character in the novel, says he does not believe in the existence of God because of the impossibility of reconciling the existence of such an infinitely good and all-powerful Creator with the stark reality of evil in a world created by him. How can a world created by an infinitely good God be like this? How can it be a place where even innocent children suffer? “I shall refuse until I die to believe this creation in which children are tortured”, he says. He goes on to say that it is even better for God if we do not believe in him, and do all we can to fight evil in the world instead of “lifting up our eyes towards the sky where he sits in silence.”

5. DEATH

Death is the worst evil that happens to man, an evil that makes human life appear purposeless and meaningless. “If we have to die”, says Sartre (1969:545), “then our life has no meaning.” The strongest instinct in both men and animals is the instinct of self-preservation or self-perpetuation. It is, in other words, the instinct to avoid death, the instinct to continue living. Yet death is the surest thing that will happen to us. If there is only one thing that is unmistakably certain, which no sceptic has ever doubted or can ever doubt, it is that death is inevitable. It is certain that we shall all die because we were all condemned to death even before we were born. “As soon as a man is born,” says Martin Heidegger (1973:289), “he is old enough to die”. Some people are not even born before they die, they die in the womb before they are born. Some die just as they are born, some die a few minutes after they are born, some a few hours, others a few days, some a few months, others a few years. Some live to ripe old age, others in the prime of their lives and so on. Death can come and does come at any time in a person’s life, at any age, from the
ante-natal stage, to infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, to old age.

Not only is man old enough to die as soon as he is born, as Heidegger says, he actually begins to die from that very moment, that very day. Yes, we begin to die the day we are born. We are all dying men and women, for human life on earth is a dying life. And when a dying man begins to struggle to acquire all the money and wealth in the world for himself he behaves like a fool and makes himself ridiculous. Such a person is suffering from a pathological ignorance. He is either unaware of the fact that his is living a dying life, that he is dying every moment of his life, or he believes foolishly that he can take all his money and wealth with him to the grave:

"What did we bring into this world? Nothing. What can we take out of it? Nothing... Those who want to get rich ... are caught in the trap of many foolish and harmful desires which pull them down to ruin and destruction (I Tim. 6:7-9).

Such a person is living an unexamined life, a thoughtless life. We cannot understand life until we reflect on the phenomenon of death. For to learn to live is to learn to die, and to learn to die is to learn to live. For the human being, life and death are inseparably interwoven since he lives a dying life. Death is a process which spans all through life. It is not something that comes at the end a person’s life and terminates it as it is commonly viewed. On the contrary, it is something that accompanies human life all along and makes it a mortal life, a dying life (Hedegger, 1973: 307). For the human being, death begins when life begins and ends when life ends. Man carries life and death with him in a process, for each is a process which comes to an end on the day he leaves this world. That is the day both life and death end for him. In fact, the day a man dies is the day death itself dies in him, the day the process of death in him comes to an end, along with the process of mortal life. That is why we cannot understand life until we understand death, nor can we learn to live until we learn to die because the two are inseparably
interwoven in this world. A reflection on the phenomenon of
death shows the true nature of human life on earth. "Indeed
every living man is no more than a puff of wind, no more than
a passing shadow. All he does is for nothing, he gathers
wealth but he does not know who will get it" (Psalm39:5-6).
In his book *The Tragic Sense of Life*, the Spanish philosopher,
Miguel de Unamuno (1954:320), tells us that human life is a
tragedy and that philosophy is the science that studies this
tragedy. He says it is a tragedy because man's strongest
instinct and strongest desire to continue living is frustrated by
the inevitability of death, and there is nothing one can do about
it. Besides, no one is sure whether or not there is immortality,
that is, whether or not human life continues beyond the grave.
Perhaps it is extinction that awaits us at death, and we shall
be reduced to nothingness. It is tragic, human life on earth is
simply tragic.
PART TWO

WHAT IS THE WAY OUT OF THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT? WHERE LIES THE SOLUTION?

1. SCIENTISM

Many people in our day believe that science can solve all human problems, that all we need is science and technology. This is the error of scientism. Those who hold this view underrate the humanities. They see little or no value in the humanities, and would in fact want them scrapped from our universities or relegated to the position of insignificance.

They believe that science and technology have made the humanities redundant. They are the contemporary followers of August Compte (1798-1857) the “father of positivism”, who claimed that mankind had advanced beyond the stages of religion and metaphysics and is now in the positive stage, that is, the stage of positive science. It is true that we are in the age of science and technology. But it is also true that science and technology have their own limitations implied by their very method and procedure. Science by its very method deals with only one dimension of reality, that is the material side. Man’s most basic problems are not material, so science and technology are by their very method and procedure, incapable of solving man’s most basic problems. Has human life on earth any ultimate goal? Has it any ultimate meaning? Has it any ultimate purpose? Why do we live? Is man a purely material being, or does he have spiritual elements in him? Does human life terminate at death, or does it continue beyond the grave? Why am I in this world? What is the purpose of my life? What am I supposed to be doing? How am I supposed to live? Has my life any meaning? Is it worth living? Science cannot answer any of these basic questions. None of them can be taken to the laboratory for an answer. Yet they are questions that touch on man’s very existence.
The advocates of the error of scientism ignore the ambiguity of science. Science is a two-edged sword which can be used to cut both ways. It can be used to construct, to build, as well as to destroy. The greatest threat to human existence on earth today comes from the findings of science and technology. Unless it is humanised, science poses a very serious threat to human existence. It could turn out to be man's greatest and surest means of self-destruction, humanity's most effective way of suicide. Yes, science needs to be humanised by the humanities. Thus, far from rendering the humanities redundant the development of science and technology makes the humanities more necessary. It shows the urgent need of the humanities to "tame" and "humanise" science especially its application in technology. "Man towers in astonishing dominion over the visible world, whose most hidden sources of energy he is able to tap; but he knows that all the time he is in danger of allowing himself to be mastered and crushed by the very forces he had thought to control. This is the paradox of the human situation" (Rene le Trocquer, 1961:7). Science has no answer to man's most basic problems, therefore, it cannot provide the way out of the human predicament.

2. SUICIDE

Zeno, the Ancient Greek philosopher and founder of Stoicism, recommended suicide as a way out of an unhappy and frustrating life. The purpose of life, according to him, is happiness. If a person's life continues to be a frustrated and unhappy one, then, it is not worth living and it should be terminated by suicide. There is no point in continuing to live an unhappy life. Zeno argues that nature itself has made provision for suicide for those who find life frustrating, unhappy and not worth continuing. Nature made provision for only one way of entering into this world, argues Zeno, but it provided many outlets out of it, various ways of getting out of it, so that any one who does not want to continue in it can take any one
of the outlets and get out of it. When Zeno himself found life frustrating and unhappy he took one of the exits out, by committing suicide.

Zeno's doctrine of suicide is nevertheless inconsistent with the rest of Stoic doctrine which recommends enduring misfortune with fortitude and equanimity. Even the existentialist philosophers who lay emphasis on man's predicament and see human life on earth as absurd, rule out suicide as a way out. They see suicide as a cowardly attempt to escape responsibilities, a manifestation of lack of courage to tackle the problems of life. We subscribe to the existentialist view. Suicide is not a way out, it is not a solution to the problems of life. It betrays lack of courage and a pathological illusion. In fact, far from solving any problem, suicide compounds it by adding to it. A person who commits suicide as a way of solving a problem has not solved the problem. Instead he has added to it by constituting himself into a problem to others, especially his friends and relations.

3. HEDONISM

The hedonists maintain that pleasure is the goal of life and see man as a pleasure seeking animal. The purpose of life, according to them, is to have as much pleasure as possible and enjoy oneself. "Let us eat and drink today for tomorrow we may die" is the hedonist slogan. The first hedonist philosopher in the West was Aristippus of Cyrene, the founder of the Cyrenaic school in the 4th century B.C. Aristippus saw pleasure as the goal of life and the standard of right and wrong in human behaviour. Actions that produce pleasure or lead to pleasure are good and should be pursued while those that cause pain are bad and should be avoided (Omoregbe, 1991:70-71). Jeremy Bentham, the 18th century British philosopher is a well known hedonist and utilitarian. He tells us that man is a pleasure-seeking and pain-avoiding animal, that nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, namely, pleasure and pain. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think. Bentham
goes on to work out what is known as “hedonistic calculus” that is, seven principles or guidelines for choosing the purest and best kind of pleasure. The hedonistic calculus is intended to guide man on how best to live a life of pleasure, (Omoregbe, 1995:223-238). Is man really a pleasure seeker by nature, as the hedonists would have us believe? Are we really in this world just to seek pleasure and have as much pleasure as possible? Is that all human life is about? Is pleasure-seeking the way out of the human predicament? Far from being the way out of the human predicament, hedonism complicates it by reducing man to the level of a pleasure seeking animal, a pleasure-seeker, whose main purpose of being in this world is to seek pleasure. Surely there is more to human life than just seeking pleasure for its own sake. The main error of hedonism is its confusion of pleasure with happiness. Pleasure and happiness are not synonymous. They are distinct. Pleasure does not always lead to happiness. Having pleasure does not mean being happy. Pleasure-seekers are generally unhappy and frustrated people who go from one hotel to another in search of pleasure in a futile attempt to suppress their frustration with pleasure. (Omoregbe, 1979: 83-84)

4. ASCETICISM

The cynic and the stoic schools of philosophy in Ancient Greece recommended asceticism and simplicity of life, a life close to nature, as the way out of the human predicament. They warned men against the danger of becoming engulfed in the material things of this world or seeking to satisfy one’s insatiable sensual desires. These things, far from making men happy, bring them more problems, more frustrations and unhappiness. People who embark on the acquisition of material wealth and on gratifying their sensual desires multiply their sources of sorrow, frustration and unhappiness. We find the same doctrine in the philosophy of Plotinus. And if we turn to the East we find even greater emphasis on asceticism in Indian philosophy. Hinduism, Buddhism and
especially Jainism are at pains to warn men to refrain from a life dominated by materialism and pleasure, and embrace the ascetic way of life as the way that leads to happiness and ultimate self-fulfilment. Sidartha Gautama (who later became known as Buddha) and his contemporary Vardhamamana, the founder of Jainism, were both princes, born into wealth and the life of pleasure. But they both rejected wealth and the life of pleasure in the palace as an illusion and went into the forest to live ascetic lives as monks in search of illumination and true happiness (Omoregbe, 1999:75-141).

Is asceticism the answer? Is it the way out? Asceticism is a high level of self-control, self-discipline, which, coupled with simplicity of life, is a right step in the right direction in the search for the ultimate purpose of human life. The more disciplined a man's life is, the simpler, the closer to nature and the happier it becomes. Luxury, complexity of life and the artificialities of modern urban life, do not make life happier. On the contrary they bring more problems and more unhappiness. So, asceticism goes a long way in providing the answer and showing the way out, though on its own, by itself alone, it is not adequate.

5. COMMITMENT

The existentialist philosophers who highlight the human predicament and see human life as a meaningless absurdity rule out suicide as a way out and recommend commitment instead. It is through commitment to a worthy cause that man gives meaning to his life. They recommend in particular commitment to fight injustice, oppression, commitment to help the poor, the afflicted, the oppressed.

There is no doubt that commitment of one's life in doing good in the pursuit of a worthy cause gives one's life a meaning and a value. In this regard Mother Theresa of Calcutta stands out as a shining example. She committed her life to the cause of alleviating the suffering of the poor, the wretched, the outcast, the dying in the streets of Calcutta in India. In so doing she so endeared herself to the Indians that when she
died a day of National Mourning was observed throughout India, and she was given a state burial, the type given to Heads of State. This was in recognition of her selfless commitment and service to India. Hers was a life well spent in commitment to a worthy cause. For it is not the amount of money or wealth one succeeds in amassing in one’s life-time that gives meaning and value to one’s life, but the amount of good one does.

6. CULTISM

Many people resort to cultism as a way out of the human predicament. They join cults in search of protection, money, wealth, high position or spiritual power. They acquire for example, the power to go on astral travel, the power to vanish, the power to manipulate people or even to kill, the power to perform magic, and so on. In the course of their initiation they are introduced to “masters”, i.e., spiritual beings whom they serve and from whom they derive their protection, power, money or wealth. But neither the money, wealth, nor the power is given gratis. There are conditions attached to them. Nothing goes for nothing. There are prices to be paid, proportionate to the protection, money, wealth or power given, and there are covenants to be made between the cultists and their “masters” (Uzorma, 1994). Some of the cultists claim to be the incarnation of the “masters” and they demand worship from their followers who see them as divine beings. Prices must be paid by the cultists in return for the protection, money, wealth, or power enjoyed. In many cases, the prices include having to “donate” the life (or blood) of a close relation, to be killed spiritually for sacrifice.

Secrecy is part of the covenant. There is an oath of secrecy which strictly forbids the cultists from divulging any of the activities of the cult. The oath of secrecy is enforced with severe threat of death, insanity, severe sickness or similar grave misfortune as punishment for violation of the oath of secrecy. Besides, once initiated into the cult, withdrawal from it is strictly forbidden. Any attempt to withdraw is severely
punished as in the case of the violation of the oath of secrecy, since withdrawal invariably leads to divulging the secrets of the cult. Thus, once a person is lured into a cult with the promise or protection, wealth, power, etc., he eventually discovers that he has put himself in bondage, and withdrawal is never easy (Uzorma, 1994).

It is clear that cultism is not the way out of the human predicament, for it amounts to “going from fry-pan to fire”. The cultic world is a demonic world of illusion which offers no genuine solution to human problems. On the contrary, cultism worsens human problems. It is an evil world, which multiplies evil in our world. The cultists are made to pay for what they enjoy, and the prices they pay are evil. The higher a person’s position, the more power or wealth he enjoys, the higher the price he pays for it in other words, the greater the evil he is required to do e.g. “donating” human beings for sacrifice.

Many cultists are trapped and live in bondage. They are lured into it by the search for protection, money, wealth or power. Little do they know at the initial stage that it is going to involve so much evil later. By the time their eyes are open to the true nature of the cult, i.e., the evil involved in it, it would be too late. They were no longer free to withdraw their membership. They find themselves trapped in a worse predicament than that from which they were trying to escape. (There is, however, a way out. Anybody who finds himself in this position and wants to get out of it should see the author privately).

7. INDIFFERENCE

Some people have adopted an attitude of indifference to the problem of human predicament. They simply ignore it, and show no interest in or concern for it. If the questions arise in their minds, they suppress them. One can hardly go through life without having to ask oneself questions about the meaning of human life and its ultimate destiny. Such questions arise, for example, at funerals, at the interment of beloved ones. As the coffin is lowered into the grave and is being
covered with sand, the burning questions haunt the mind of a thoughtful person. Is this the end of it all? Does life continue beyond the grave? What happens to the dead person now? Where does he or she go from here? After the interment, all friends and relations who came for the interment depart, everyone going his own way leaving the dead alone there in the grave. The questions continue to haunt the mind of a thoughtful person. What has been the meaning and ultimate value of all his struggles through life? Is this the final end of it all? Was it worth the trouble since it was destined to end up in this way? What was the point of it all? Such questions arise in the minds of thoughtful persons not only at funerals or interments, but at the sight of horrible, tragic, accidents, or suffering caused by terminal illness, from which there is no hope of recovery. Some people suppress these questions when they arise in their minds. They neither want to think about them nor are they bothered about the problem of the human predicament. It is not a solution to the problem.

Those who adopt this attitude are living unexamined lives, and, according to Socrates, an unexamined life is not worth living. Such people can be likened to people who are travelling but who are not interested in finding out or even thinking about where they are going, or the purpose of their journey. They know that they are travelling, but they don’t know where they are travelling to or why they are even travelling at all. What is the purpose of this journey? Where is the destination? What are they going to do when they get there? They are not interested, they don’t even want to think about it. All they know is that they are travelling, that is all. This is not an intelligent attitude, it doesn’t make sense. How can a person be travelling and not be interested in knowing why he is travelling, where he is going to, or what he is going to do when he gets to his destination?

8. PROCREATION

African philosophical thought has it that the purpose of our life on earth is to procreate, that is, to beget children.
Hence, a person who dies childless is considered as having lived a frustrated life, a life whose purpose was not fulfilled (Omoregbe, 1990:23). This reasoning leads logically to the conclusion that the more children a person has the more successful his life since we are in this world mainly to have children. And since the more wives a man acquires, the more children he will have, it follows also that the more wives a man has the more successful, the more meaningful and the more fulfilled his life will be. In that case it would appear that, Solomon, who had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, (one thousand women) with innumerable children lived a very successful and very meaningful life while great philosophers like Plato, Epicurus, Descartes, Kant, Sartre, and others, who had no wives and no children lived frustrated lives. Monks and other celebates would also be considered as living frustrated lives.

In the first place we can see clearly that this way of reasoning is circular. Life itself must have a purpose and be meaningful before its reproduction can be meaningful. If life in itself is meaningless then its reproduction is also meaningless. That was precisely why philosophers, like Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre refused to marry or have children. Since human life is meaningless and absurd, why bring children into this absurdity? Why bring more people into it? It is clear then that reproduction cannot be the way out of the human predicament.

9. RELIGION

Very many people resort to religion as a way out of the human predicament. They turn to religion in search of answers to the fundamental questions about human life. That was precisely the observation of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

From the various religions men expect answers to the secret enigmas of the human condition which deeply troubled the human heart yesterday as they do today. Man's nature, the meaning and
end of our life, good and sin, the origin and aim of suffering, the way to reach true happiness, death, judgement and sanction after death, finally, the ultimate and ineffable mystery which envelops our existence, where we came from and where we are going (Abbot, 1967:661).

Speaking along the same line of thought, Karl Briton (1969:19) says that for one to find meaning in life two conditions must be fulfilled:

1. There must be a goal worthwhile for its own sake and not impossible to man; and

2. There must be a goal set for him by God.

Ignace Lepp (1969:23) who is also of this school of thought, says that everyone has two vocations. The first of these summons him to ascertain the purpose of his life, while the second requires him to make use of all the means at his disposal in order to achieve the purpose. The former is called *transcendental vocation* and the later a *temporal vocation*.

"The man who rejects God" he says "is no longer a man but only a creature for himself, a thing without destiny or stability, without a *raison d'etre*, not knowing whence he comes whither he goes or even what he is."

Yes, religion supplies answers to the fundamental questions disturbing the human mind, questions about the purpose and meaning of human life, and its ultimate destiny – where we are coming from, where we are going to and what will happen to us when we die. But what is religion? It is an interpersonal relationship between God, and man, an interaction between the creature and his creator. In the course of this interpersonal relationship, God answers man's basic questions about his life, why he is here in this world, what he expects him to do, how he is expected to live, where he comes from, where he is going, what will happen to him when he gets to his final destination after death, etc.

Nobody can explain why a thing is made except the maker. Nobody can explain why a particular thing is placed in a particular place except the person who placed it there. He
alone knows why he chose to place it where it is. Thus, nobody can explain why man exists at all, or why he is in this world except his maker who made him and placed him here in this world. As we observed earlier, man simply finds himself on a journey in this world, without knowing the purpose of the journey, where he is going to and, what he is going to do when he gets to the unknown destination. He does not even know how soon the journey will end. He does not know whether he is still far from his destination or whether he is very near. These are the enigmas of human life which constitute the human predicament. Religion provides answers to these enigmas of life and shows us the way out of the human predicament. By so doing it removes absurdity from human life and gives it a meaning. Thus, the religious man does not see human life as meaningless. It is the atheists and the agnostics that see human life as absurd. That was why Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus saw human life as meaningless and absurd; precisely because they were atheist and agnostic, respectively.

The crucial issue then is whether or not a person believes in God and submits to him. This is what, in the final analysis, determines whether life is meaningful or meaningless. To believe or not to believe, that is the question. To submit to God or not to submit to him, that is the question. That is the crux of the matter. Pascal Blaise, the French Christian philosopher, formulated what later came to be known as “Pascal’s Wager”, designed to help people make up their minds to believe in God and submit to him. The Wager goes thus:

Perhaps God exists, perhaps he does not exist. If you believe in him, and when you die you discover that he exists you will be happy that you believed in him, because he will reward you. You will have everything to gain and nothing to lose, since you lose nothing by believing in him. If you believe in him and when you die it turns out that he does not exist,
you have nothing to lose. You gain nothing and lose nothing. But if you refuse to believe in him and when you die you discover that he exists then you are in trouble. You would be sorry for yourself for not believing in him. You lose everything and gain nothing by not believing in him. It is therefore wise to be on the safer side by believing in him and submitting to him since, at worst, you would have nothing to gain and nothing to lose if he does not exist, but everything to gain if he actually exists. A wise person would choose the better option that will put him on a safer side and that is the option of believing in God and submitting to him. Besides, this option gives meaning to human life and removes absurdity from it. The alternative option (i.e., refusal to believe in God and submit to him) is not a wise one, for it puts a person in a situation in which he has nothing to gain in the final analysis, even if God does not exist and everything to lose if he really exists. Besides, it commits one to a meaningless and absurd life.

CONCLUSION

The human predicament is the situation in which man simply finds himself in this world without knowing why he is here, the purpose of his existence and what will happen to him when he dies. It is like the situation of a man who simply finds himself on a journey, travelling to an unknown destination. He does not even know why he is on that journey, he does not know where he is going to or where he is coming from. Again, the human predicament is the situation in which man finds himself empty, restless and suffering from so much evil, with so many unanswered questions in his mind. It is the situation in which human life appears meaningless and absurd, a situation which leads some people to resort to suicide in order to terminate their (meaningless) lives. Some resort to
hedonism - “let us eat and drink today for tomorrow we may die”, others resort to asceticism, some resort to commitment, some to cultism while others maintain an attitude of indifference.

The best thing for man to do in order to get out of this predicament is to seek his maker, his creator, dialogue with him, and interact with him. Only his maker knows why he made him, why he is in this world, what he is supposed to do where he is coming from and where he is going to. In short, it is only his maker that can answer his existential questions about the purpose and meaning of his life. This process of dialogue and interaction with one’s creator is what is called religion and it is the only authentic way out of the human predicament. Religion is essentially interpersonal relationship, a dialogue, or interaction between man and his creator. In the course of this interaction, man’s hitherto unanswered questions will be answered and his life which hitherto appeared meaningless becomes very meaningful.

There are, however, numerous organisations in our day that go by the name “religion”. Some of these organisations are demonic cults, others are very lucrative business ventures set up to make money. One should be careful to distinguish authentic religion from such cults and business ventures which camouflage as “religion”. There are two criteria that can be used to identify an authentic religion: The first is the holiness of life of the founder. The founder of an authentic religion must be a holy man or woman, whose personal life is exemplary, morally outstanding, with an impeccable character, a life worth emulating. Acquisition of money should not be his or her pre-occupation. Second, the doctrines of the religion and what it enjoins its adherents to do must be morally sound. If the founder of a religion lives an immoral life, enjoins his followers to do immoral things or if he makes the acquisition of money or material prosperity his main pre-occupation, his religion is clearly not an authentic one and it cannot be the way out of the human predicament. It is either a cult or a business venture. Authentic religion focuses on repentance,
transformation of life, holiness of life, and ultimate salvation, (not material prosperity) and these qualities must be exemplified in the personal life of the founder who preaches more by the example of his personal life than by words.
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