



TO LIVE OR NOT TO LIVE: AN EXISTENTIAL DILEMMA

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Abstract

No other philosophy considers the human condition as existential philosophy does. Like Hamlet in Shakespeare's play, human beings face an existential dilemma. We continually seek meaning in our existence. We do not choose to come into being, nor do we choose the problems we face. However, existentialism seeks meaning in the self and encourages the authentic realisation of the self through conscious effort. The fundamental problem of the existential movement is to spread knowledge of what constitutes life and living. The world appears to us in various ways and presents us with different challenges. Yet existentialism can give meaning to the place of individuals in a perplexing world. An existential view is an important component of living, as opposed to merely being alive. Many have lost hope in a world that has alienated individuals from themselves. To live involves an understanding of existentialism. In contrast, not living is not dying, but rather failing to identify and realise the self through conscious desire and will. The existential dilemma is not about coming into the world and leaving the world. The dilemma is about the decision to live passively or actively as beings in the world.

Keywords: Existential Dilemma, Existential Philosophy, Existentialism, Hamlet, Living, Not Living

Introduction

In William Shakespeare's play *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, Hamlet contemplates life and death using the famous quote, "to be or not to be ...". This quote from a soliloquy in the opening scene of the play is one of the most popular quotes in modern English literature. We draw on this famous quote to reflect on the main character's dilemma and how it affects humanity. In the play, Hamlet seems to be in a dilemma when the ghost of his father requires him to kill his uncle to avenge his death. Hamlet is torn between life and death as he reflects on his circumstances in the play. The nature of the dilemma depicted in this work of fiction reverberates throughout humanity whether we desire it or not. But for some individuals, the realness of this dilemma is more profound. Kierkegaard puts it succinctly: "... If you hang yourself, you will regret it; if you do not hang yourself, you will regret it; if you hang yourself or you do not hang yourself, you will regret both. This gentleman is the sum of all practical wisdom." (Kierkegaard 2004: 47, 48). This saying implies that we are condemned to make choices whether we appreciate the outcomes or not. However, our focus is not solely on the choices but on the nature and gravity of these choices. Given that we find ourselves in certain spatio-temporal circumstances and that we are present in a mundane world. It follows that this dilemma is interwoven with our being. Our being in this sense is the total of our entirety and self. This paper looks at the nature of this dilemma and tries to understand what it means to live and how it differs from not living. This classification is pertinent for us to cushion the burden of this existential dilemma on humanity. Our aim is not to deliberate on the rudiments of being or the ontological implications of existential phenomenology per se but to understand the inevitable facticity of this burden.

The Concept of Existence

It is a common habit of human beings to label things, and this labelling may arguably influence the perception of the thing. According to Reynolds and Herman, "the meaning of objects and events can be altered through the creative capabilities of humans, and individuals may influence the many meanings that form their society, as well as being influenced by these meanings themselves." (1) This notion is pertinent at this point because the meaning of what it means to live will frame our articulation of the dilemma human beings face in their lives. The notion of living in this context is philosophical as opposed to biological and stems from the existential tradition. Living in this sense implies the notion of "personal responsibility and absolute lucidity". (Audi 255) Living is not by accident or coincidence but requires a conscious desire and will to shape an individual's fate. Therefore, the meaning of life is linked to its definition through action. By biology, we are participants in the play called life, but the burden of the dilemma demands more than just being biological entities. This idea of 'to live' is similar to Kierkegaard's use of the verb 'to exist'. To exist implies a process of discovering, actualising, and affirming one's identity and place in the cosmos through free choices. (Audi 406)

For Sartre, this follows that man is the original project and is imbued with freedom. Rose (2) opines that "... the agent being solely responsible for his acts leads to anguish, the dread of being free ...". Anguish is the individual's realisation of his freedom and the implications of this condemnation. This freedom Sartre expresses is ours to utilise in the process of self-actualisation. To live, to exist, requires this freedom, for without it there is no burden. The idea that man is free and condemned to make something of himself is a fundamental doctrine of existentialism. This making of himself is synonymous with living or existing. For Sartre, the fundamental doctrine that unites all existentialists is that "existence precedes essence". (20) Existentialism is a way of pondering about life that exalts individual responsibility and freedom

above other precepts. It attempts to clarify the meaning of life and living. The question of how we should live is an integral part of our thoughts as rational beings. Existentialism is a philosophical movement that tries to fill that void by ruminating about the notion of living. It stands as a framework for looking at life, and like Hamlet, we are faced with this dilemma.

The Existential Framework

Understanding existentialism requires us not only to understand the similarities between the views of the different philosophers but also the differences. For Copleston (1948, 19), Sartre and Marcel are both existential philosophers, but their positions on existentialism are not the same. However, at the foundation of all things existential is the focus on and reevaluation of existence. According to Sartre, the doctrine that "existence precedes essence" is what unites all existentialists. (Copleston 1948, 19) This doctrine of existence tends to emphasise the burden of man's freedom to will his circumstances and situations by choice. This position is arguably opposed to any form of determinism.

According to Mooney (2018:63), Kierkegaard offers possibilities without determining the best choice out of the various possibilities. Existential philosophy brings us to a place of awareness of the possibilities amid our freedom. This freedom in existentialism is different from the ordinary notion of freedom. As Killinger puts it, nine out of ten persons would consider a waiter freer than a man incarcerated. This freedom, according to him, is "inviolable regardless of circumstances" (1961, 303). Freedom in the existential sense is an attitude and disposition towards life, rather than placement. Philosophers from other schools of thought might bother about man's placement in the world, but the existentialist tradition attempts to put the focus on man, as illustrated in Camus' saying, "whether life is worth living or not". (Floistad 1981, 1)

A life worth living is rooted in the concept of authenticity, which is in turn rooted in the existential notion of freedom. (Greene 1952, 266) Authenticity is the application of freedom in shaping ourselves regardless of our essential nature. Life is absurd because a reevaluation of our present condition reveals its meaninglessness. We make the leap from absurdity to authenticity by applying the existential attitude towards life. This leap in the existential sense is inevitable because of the apparent meaninglessness of our current situation. Our essence seems to be fixed, but our existence is within reach and amenable. This is in affinity with Soren Kierkegaard's notion of faith. Faith for Kierkegaard is fundamental for human beings, and only through faith can the authentic self be revealed. (McDonald 1996) However, Sartre considers acting in bad faith when we fail to acknowledge the facticity of our freedom, thereby evading the responsibility of conscious living by self-deception. (Detmer 2008, 75) Therefore, the facticity of our freedom is glaring and inevitable; both Kierkegaard and Sartre affirm the possibilities before man. This possibility in turn validates the dilemma or burden we face as human beings. The meaning and the quality of life from an existentialist's view are based on our freedom to forge ourselves intentionally.

The Existential Dilemma

One of the fundamental themes of existential philosophy is the encouragement to recreate oneself consciously. This apparent need comes out of a realisation of our present predicament, a predicament that existentialists have tried to elucidate in various ways. The existential dilemma is reflected in the burden of choice amidst the turmoil we find ourselves in. This turmoil raises the question of meaning in a seemingly meaningless and mundane world. Human beings try to rationalise life and living; we mourn the dead and try to evade the inevitable. We eschew pain and sometimes seek pleasure; we desire a life of some sort, but the sort of life each desires is arguable. Taking cognisance of the end of the play where Hamlet, Claudius (Hamlet's uncle – the

king), Gertrude (Hamlet's mother – the queen), and Laertes (who conspires to kill Hamlet with Claudius in a duel) all die. The end of the play reminds us of our inevitable demise regardless of circumstances. The Queen says to Hamlet in Scene II that it is common that all that lives must die. In light of this realisation, how are we to live?

The severity of the existential dilemma is highlighted in the play when we consider how the apparent burden seems to have driven Hamlet mad. We are often faced with making decisions that may determine the trajectory of our lives. The distinction between living and dying is not about being and not being. Living in the existential sense is about our 'being' transcending itself through will and effort. There are different kinds of species in the world, and we ascribe life to them. We can say animals live or are alive because they constitute some time and space. They are present around us and seem to serve some purpose in the natural scheme of things. It is easy to see the interdependence of species and their value to the natural order of which we are also a part. But if we are to merely ascribe living with being present in spatio-temporal terms, then there is no point of meaning to our efforts.

This is not in isolation from deliberations on freedom and determinism; however, our main concern is our imminent freedom. The idea of a dilemma presupposes a conflict between available choices. The nature of the choices haunted Hamlet in the play and still haunts us in real life. It is poignant in our desire for meaning in our daily living in a world of varying perplexities. It is also important to note the scope of our choices as living entities in this world. Our choices are subject to temporal considerations. The starting point is being acquainted with the realisation of the dilemma, after which decisions must be made. Each choice provides us with some possibilities, but the sum of the dilemma is demonstrated in our desire to live our best possible lives. One of the challenges within the existential framework is how to measure the extent to which an individual conforms to this philosophical system. In this regard, we must delineate the

concept of doing from the done. The doing is a process, a practice that continues as one embraces the tenets of existentialism. The done, on the other hand, represents an end, a finality that deprives being of actualisation and realisation. The vivacity of the dilemma is evident in our attempt to be doing what we are inevitably condemned to.

Conclusion

The idea of a dilemma emanates from the need to think about life and living within a philosophical context. Philosophy takes both the material and the immaterial into account, from which we gain insight about the nature of existence. This existential perspective is a reaction to the chaos in the midst of passive and unconscious living. This kind of living is exposed through philosophical reflection and melancholy, which in turn leads to a reaction. The reaction itself is the focus on existence and the underlying circumstances surrounding it. The implication of which is the need to make the best out of life and living. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche considers the betterment of oneself as "a great and rare art!" It involves fitting our strengths and weaknesses "into an artistic plan until each appears as art, and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. (Williams, Nauckoff, Del Caro 2001, 193) However, the nature of the dilemma is ontological and manifests itself in different ways in the mundane. Our existence is also within reach; we reach it by trying to forge our destinies through conscious effort. It is common for us to desire more from ourselves and from life by willing. We engage with our thoughts to uncover the burden of our lived experiences and summarise those experiences to make meaning of them.

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