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*Puríssima Emelda  
Egbekpalu, PhD*

Department of Philosophy  
Madonna University, Nigeria

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thoughtandactiontjp@gmail.com

# Philosophy Clinic: An Existential Need for Contemporary Nigerian Society

*Puríssima Emelda Egbekpalu, PhD*

Department of Philosophy  
Madonna University, Nigeria

## **Abstract**

Human life is a complex phenomenon. In the recent times, a lot more of challenges that border on the worth and value of human life in general confront man. The contemporary Nigerians in particular have been so evidently plagued with daunting challenges. At the moment, the nation is exceedingly insecure! Such experiences affect their existence and spur them to question more consciously why they live. The true meaning of life and promotion of human dignity lethargically wane. Considering the myriad of economic, socio-political, religious, educational and the numerous devastating problems that menace the lives of Nigerians, this paper examines the best practice to re-discover more meaning and purpose as they navigate through those challenges of life. It then postulates the existential exigency of 'philosophy clinic' for authentic human existence. It portrays the role of existential philosophy towards authentic human existence through the analysis of human life and experiences. It submits that its relevance lies in assisting the individuals towards more self-creation and the implicit responsibility as well as recognizing new meanings in life even in the most miserable situations for enhancement of inner peace and harmony. The paper also discovers that discovering opportunities for exercise of meaningful actions will eventually discourage and curb actions that endanger human life and dignity in contemporary Nigerian society.

**Key Words:** Philosophy clinic, exigency, human existence, contemporary Nigeria,

## **Introduction**

Philosophical activity is one of the noblest of human tasks. Aristotle (NE, 10:7) expressed it better when he writes, "Philosophical activity is admittedly the most pleasant of all activities. It entails pleasures that are marvelous in purity and permanence. It stands to reason that those who possess such knowledge pass their time more pleasantly..." In this vein of thought, Egbekpalu (2019 p. 150) submits that "philosophy is an activity of life *per excellence*. Its enterprise encompasses all ramifications of life." Throughout the ages, philosophy prides herself as the Mother and Queen of all sciences. Philosophical study is classically known for its reflective enquiry into the realities of life to understand the universal phenomena; the nature of man inclusive. Interestingly, each age in the history of man's existence adopts philosophical methods that are valid for the time. No wonder

the great German philosopher, Hegel (Galagher, 1997, p. 149) hinted that every philosopher is a child of his own age. Therefore, philosophical activities are dependent on time and place. Thus, “Whatever happens, every individual is a child of his time; so philosophy too is its own time apprehended in thoughts. It is just as absurd to fancy that a philosopher can transcend its contemporary world as it is to fancy that an individual can overleap his own age, jump over Rhodes.” Russell (1946, p. 7) added, “Philosophers are both effects and causes; effects of the social circumstances and the politics and social institutions of their time; causes...of the beliefs, which mould the politics and institutions of later age.”

Understandably, the ideology of each generation guides the people. This paper will briefly present the major features of each era in order to clearly present the notion of man in the contemporary time. The understanding of man through the various stages of human existence especially at the current time will help to understand his challenges and possible ways to navigate through and out of them. Often times, emphases are made on the practical aspect of philosophy for the good of man and the society in general but with less implementation. So, like Hosea, one is lured to exclaim that our people perish for lack of good and practical philosophy that addresses the need of the current time.

### **The Image of Man down the Epochs**

The question regarding who man is has been a perennial question, yet ever made new. Generally, man has always been perceived as the supreme creature but then he remains an enigma to himself. Therefore, the quest to understand himself has been an age-long philosophical endeavor but always made new in each epoch. This section presents the image of man as viewed by philosophers from ancient Greek period to the contemporary time, that is, across the four major periods of human development, namely; cosmocentric, theocentric, anthropocentric and neurocentric stages.

**Cosmocentric Period:** This is known as the classical Greek era. The philosophers of this period were more interested in knowing the reason for the being of all things including man. Therefore, they studied man alongside nature as being intrinsically part of the cosmos. Hence, the cosmocentric period. Understandably, most Greek philosophers at this onset of philosophical enquiry were not so much interested in the very nature of man but in his status in the universe as they were majorly occupied with the unfolding of cosmic phenomena. As such, they did not deal directly with man’s ontology but with his status though they recognized that man has a more refined element in him. Therefore, he is the apex of all creatures and according to the Sophists, the measure of all things.

**Theocentric Period:** This is acknowledged as the medieval period when man is chiefly occupied with theocentric notions about himself. So understood, the philosophers of this era engaged themselves with the studies about man in the radiance of God’s relationship to man based on the history of salvation. Along this line of thought, man was generally conceived as *imago Dei* (an image of God) having been created by Him. The Platonian dualistic notion of man as essentially a soul and Aristotelian hylemorphic composite view of man based on the premise that the body is subordinate to the soul, among others paved way for the understanding that man is not just a corporeal but also a spiritual being. This supremacy of man’s soul over the body explains the immortality of the soul.

**Anthropocentric Period:** This is the modern era when man is significantly no longer tied to the universe and its inevitable laws. This paradigm shift from the study of nature of the universe to the

study of man and his relationship to others and his environment in general brought man to the brilliance study of himself, that is *man qua man*. Hence, it is referred to as anthropocentric period. In this case, everything revolves around man himself as the standard of all things. Understandably, man perceives himself as both creature of his environment and creator of his values as he seeks to understand the complex and dynamic nature of his being. So conceived, man is mirrored as one who constantly rediscovers and recreates himself within the confines of his biological and socio-cultural spheres.

**Neurocentric Period:** This is the current period when man is being studied in relation to other minds with regard to Artificial Intelligence. In this period, technological advancement renders the knowledge of man more sophisticated such that his nature is even made more complex. These complexities in knowledge and understanding of man also influence the thoughts and behaviours of people. The impact is so enormous when it relates with the global status of the perceptions of man regarding his dignity and sacredness of life in general. The degree of impunity in the society has led to significant loss of meaning in life. As a matter of fact, many people are beginning to question in more concrete terms the reality of their being and the ultimate goal of their existence.

### **Philosophy and Praxis: A Harmonious Existential Reality**

Philosophy is renewably made relevance by addressing the needs of given times. It has been observed (Egbekaplu, 2019 p. 68) that,

Significantly from the modern era but more in recent times, philosophical endeavours focus not just on the epistemic dimension (search for knowledge) but also on practical and existential issues for man's well-being and happiness. Philosophy is a universal discipline that directly enquires into the phenomena of life, while it concerns itself with the basic questions and problems confronting man and his existence and the environment in which he lives...It is generally understood to be a humanistic discipline with a reflective activity that can be translated into praxis and a strong quest for wisdom which guides man and offer him the necessary prescriptions to cope with the challenges of life and existence for his well-being, that of others and the society at large.

In particular, existential philosophers go beyond mere understanding of man as a bipedal locomotive being. They ask crucial questions such as the ultimate origin of human life, the essence of man, the reality of human existence within two worlds of physical and spiritual, the goal and the meaning of human existence.

However, the contemporary experiences of life have necessitated a more practical way to philosophize which involves a harmonious interplay of thought and action. This serves double purposes of the existential needs of man. Firstly, it sets forth the relevance of philosophy as a discipline that concerns itself with human life and existence. Secondly, it helps to put man on the proper track as he navigates through the challenges of life. This is thought to be better realized with the novel idea of '**philosophy clinic**'. Because as the early German anthropologist, Scheler (1961, p. 6) observed, "the increasing multiplicity of the special sciences that deal with man,

valuable as they are, tend to hide his nature more than they reveal it.” Corroborating this position, the great German existentialist, Heidegger (1962, pp. 275-276) exclaimed,

No epoch has had, as ours had, notions so numerous and varied of man. No epoch has succeeded as ours has in presenting its knowledge about man in such a fascinating and effective way, or in communicating this knowledge in so rapid and easy a way. Yet, it is also true that no epoch has known less than ours what man is. Never has man assumed so problematic an appearance as he has in our times.

Heschel (1965) further stated,

We have never been as open-mouthed and inquisitive, never as astonished and embarrassed at our ignorance about man. We know what he makes but we do not know what he is or what to expect of him. Is it not conceivable that our civilization is built upon a misinterpretation of man? Or that the tragedy of man is due to the fact that he is a being who has forgotten the question: who is man? The failure to identify himself, to know what is authentic human existence, leads him to assume a false identity, to pretending to be what he is unable to be or to not accepting what is at the very root of his being. Ignorance about man is not lack of knowledge but false knowledge.

Against this background, the renowned Italian anthropologist, Mondin (1998 pp. 3-4) avers,

Thus, today more than ever, the noble but onerous burden of the mystery of man falls on the shoulders of the philosopher... The challenge, has always been posed to philosophy from the very beginning...the same has returned to impress itself with an acute urgency and renewed interest.

The above illustrations necessitated a new dimension in philosophical enterprise to understand man and his challenges and to guide him towards a sense of inner identity in order to give more meaning to his life.

### **Philosophy Clinic: An Exigency for Authentic Human Existence in Contemporary Nigeria**

Philosophic wonder grew out of curiosity and concern for the people. Understandably, philosophical endeavour is man-oriented. Philosophy remains relevant in as much as it critically examines human activities of each age and proffers practical solutions. Philosophy is to human life what the soul is to the body. It directly concerns itself with issues revolving around the reality of human existence. Philosophical heritage is enduringly valid because it mirrors the culture of people and takes into account current issues as it appropriately responds to the demands of the time. Elucidating this idea, Egbekpalu (2019 pp. 151-152) states,

Philosophical roles are quite sublime and valuable in our complex society and they are utterly appropriate for all times as they are made anew each time for any circumstance. Among all, philosophy provides a reasonable framework and maintains a rational outlook by honing one's ability to think clearly and critically of the realities of life and on the concrete situations for a more authentic living. It educates and shapes human mind on the fundamental basis of life in general and that of people in particular by interpreting values.

At this juncture, it is suitable to ask- what is philosophy clinic? As said earlier, philosophy illumines and liberates the mind, being conscious of the fact that everything starts from the mind. With clinic, one imagines health related activities as clinic is understandably a health-care centre. Within the context of this logic, philosophy clinic therefore means a milieu where man is philosophically made healthy. Here, 'philosophically' depicts using philosophical reasoning to liberate the mind by widening his horizon and sense of purpose to think and act responsibly better. This also includes equipping the individuals with life-changing skills that aid them to strike a healthy balance in their dealings with life by responding positively to the challenges and opportunities of life.

Its major role is to offer a healthy outlook to life through creative thinking as well as aiding critical insights into realities of life that permit healthy adaptations and well-being. How does it realize this goal? At this point, it is important to note that the proposed philosophy clinic will adopt above all the principles of existential philosophy for existential counselling. Counselling here does not involve the traditional methods of counselling such as psychological counselling, educational counselling, etc. Rather, it consists of employing existential approach to issues of life based on the freedom of will and responsibility of actions. It gears towards assisting man in widening his scope of life for better self-awareness and conscious decisions regarding his specific values in living more purposefully and giving more meaning to his life as he responds to life's challenges. It is more of a person-centred approach to concrete existential experiences of life which does not actually require persuasions but guidance and convictions to one's values, priorities grounded in one's personal abilities. The philosophy clinic is also based on existential analysis of one's life and the disposition to make more meaning out of it even in the most miserable situation(s). This is equally based on the assumption of the Austrian logotherapist, Viktor Frankl (2006) who posits that the search for meaning in life is the ultimate force of life.

It involves posing more consciously existential questions such as: Who am I? where am I? What am I living for? What meaning has life for me? What response have I for life? What do I really want in life? etc. Philosophy clinic is actually a philosophical position that offers a meaning-centred counselling based on existential analysis of life that helps to widen the scope of life for more positive responses to the challenges and opportunities of life. This will go a long way to authenticate human existence in our contemporary time.

### **Conclusion**

Life calls for purposeful growth and meaningful development. Considering how remarkably depressed, frustrated and in fact bizarre that many people feel at this period of heightened events that shroud man's life, philosophy clinic seems to serve best by helping the individuals to attain deeper self-awareness in order to re-discover and recognize more sense of purpose and more profound meaning in life. As they mindfully respond to life events, they will be encouraged to stay more positive at difficult moments. Therefore, philosophy clinic as a new dimension of philosophical endeavor is a *conditio sine qua non* for authentic existence. It offers firm hope to

serve the existential need of contemporary Nigerian society by assisting to give more meaning to life which leads to more authentic existence.

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