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Introduction to Philosophy of the Human Person

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Comparative Philosophical Analysis on Man's Existential Purpose: Camus vs. Marcel

The purpose of man's existence has been a topic of study and debate ever since the dawn of philosophy during the time of ancient Greece. This topic is quite broad and complex as the purpose of man differs in perspective. Throughout the course of many eras, philosophers continuously sought for the true essence of human existence. As of today, there is still no definite answer to this as we, humans, remain divided by our own beliefs. This divide roots back from the varying views of philosophers who expressed their own interpretation of man's existence, backed up by thorough research and lifelong studies. Among many views, there are two particular philosophical perspectives which are prominent for their contrasting qualities: existentialism and absurdism.

Existentialism proposes that the individual has free will, which means he has the capacity to create his own purpose in life. According to Jones College, the existentialist view illustrates that humans are thinking beings who are capable of living in independence. We shape our own lives. The individual is free to choose what to believe in and is solely responsible for every decision and action made. Existentialism puts forward the idea that man is an independent being who has the freedom to make its own interpretation of the purpose of existence.

Leonora Cohen, in explains that, in the existentialist view, the world does not have an inherent meaning (2). This is the reason why it is up to the individual to define its own purpose of existence. There may be other philosophical beliefs from different people that may influence a person's own perspective, but the individual is still accountable for the choices it makes.

The existentialist view on man's purpose is reflected in the book *Being and Having* by renowned philosopher Gabriel Marcel. The book is primarily divided into two parts: 1) Being and Having and 2) Faith and Reality. In this paper, however, we will only be looking at the first part of the book.

As the title describes, part one is focused on two aspects of existence: *being* and *having*. For *being*, Marcel discussed about his reflections and analysis on what is existent and also his views on suicide. He then developed towards the idea of existence into describing its purpose in the *having* part of the book. He primarily used the concept of man's body to discuss his ideology on existential purpose.

In the first few entries of *Being and Having*, Marcel focused on the body as means for describing what an existent entity is. He first explained the concept of incarnation in relation to existence. According to Marcel, it refers to the embodiment of the self to a body (11). Man exists in the incarnation of the body and the self. The self, which Marcel was pertaining to, is presumably an abstract entity just like in the Cartesian dualism wherein man is an embodiment of the soul and a material body. He made his concept clear that the body is not to be treated as an object despite of the soul inhabiting it (12). Marcel then proceeded to explain that anything that has a connection or can be connected to the body exists. Existence is not limited to anything that is within the same system as the body but also to the extent wherein an external entity can be

united with the body (10). The author was pointing out that anything capable of being linked to the human body exists. Marcel proved his point by providing an example in the abstract level. He used thought as an example. He claimed that the human thought exists, because it is within the body. On the other hand, the ideas and knowledges which the thought attains are also existent because they are being linked towards the body through the abstractions or interpretations made by the person (27). In simpler words, anything which man perceives is existing because of the mere fact that it crossed man's thoughts, and man's thoughts exist because they are simply within the body. To summarize Marcel's point, man is an existent being, and the things around man which are capable of being linked towards the body also exist.

Aside from defining existence, Marcel also touched another topic that is related to life, which is its opposite, death. He focused on the concept of death to its relationship to the body. He explained that the body is something which can certainly be concluded as the possession of man (82). Although, Marcel did not mean that it was to be treated as an object (as what was stated earlier), otherwise man is stripping of the value off himself (12). The idea of death, in this case, suicide, may arise when the body is treated as such and when the feelings of sorrow and despair are added up to it. The meaning of existence is questioned. This is countered, however, by Marcel as he explained that the death must not be thought of as getting rid of the body (82-83). He stated that it only leads to further loss of meaning, not only for the person in contemplation of suicide but also to the people surrounding the individual. The former will only lose more reason for hope to live if the body is continued to be seen as an object. And if the process of suicide were accomplished, the latter will not see the purpose of the death as

meaningful no matter the harshness of it (137). In summary, Marcel does not deem suicide as appropriate as it will only result to a non meaningful death.

After describing the essence of existence and death, Marcel then proceeded to analyze the meaning of *having* or possession. He first explained that, in man, ownership is made possible by the body. The body serves as the instrument for owning different things around him, which may come in the form of objects or material things (163). Marcel then brought up the concept of power and its relationship to possession. Power and ownership are related to each other in the sense that the latter is obtained through the exercise of influence (159). Using material objects as an example, man exerts influence to gain something it wants to own as property. Despite of this, Marcel stated that the exact opposite actually takes place in reality. Although it is man who seeks control, the worldly things which man pleases to have power on are actually the ones that take control. The body becomes attached to these things and, as a result, becomes controlled by them. Marcel went on to say that “our possessions eat us up” (164-165). The distinction between man and the possessions that he has is lost in reality. Reality urges man to become immersed to the quality of *having*, and man tends to focus on conforming to the this standard of reality, thus losing the true essence of living. Marcel explained in an example wherein a thinker avoids being alienated from the rest despite of the ability of being able to think creatively and differently from the rest (166). In summary, Marcel viewed that the concept of ownership influences man’s thinking and results to a distorted view of reality. However, this distorted reality is what man strives to conform to in attempt to not be left out by others. In other words, the meaning of

existence depends upon what man believes in, but his beliefs may be twisted due to what reality dictates man to conform to.

On the other hand, the philosophical view which contrasts existentialism is absurdism. Absurdism refers to the perspective wherein there are always conflicts and hardships in life, but man must simply accept the harsh reality of life being difficult. According to Philosophy Index , “humanity must live in a world that is and will forever be hostile or indifferent towards them.” Life does not have meaning, and the quest for finding meaning is absurd (1). The absurdity of life is seen in the sense that man must continue living despite of hardships and difficulties and that man will keep looking for the meaning of existence despite of the absence of it. Due to this, the absurdism view explains that must stop looking for meaning and accept life as it is.

The absurdist philosophical view of existence is very evident in the works of Albert Camus. *The Myth of Sisyphus* was an essay work of Camus which discussed his ideology on life and existence. Although the title of the work was entitled as such, it only mentioned the story of Sisyphus in Greek mythology during the latter part of the essay. Most of the work was primarily composed of his absurdist views on life, but he made use of the myth as his primary support for his claims.

Regarding Camus’s views on life, he stated that it has no purpose. Life has no inherent meaning. Camus described the world as a hostile place. He explained that man initially views the world as a wonderful place to live in; but, beneath the beauty of it, will eventually come to realize and experience the indifferences, difficulties, and hardships in it. They outweigh the positive features of the world. Camus went on to explain an example that a woman, which a person may have loved from the past, may be seen as a stranger sometime in the future. The

world is a hostile place, and man is the source of inhumanity in it (5). Consequently, it meant that it is inevitable to banish difficulties in life since man himself is the source of it. This is the absurdity of the world which man lives in.

Camus also included his thoughts and ideologies about suicide with regards to the absurdist view. As he has stated earlier that life has no meaning, he then sought to determine if life really is worth living. Camus first explained the concept of suicide as an act committed by people who see life as not worth living. The world, being filled with difficulties and hardships, constantly wears down man. Camus stated that “life is never easy.” He then branched out his explanation by stating that people are given two choices in life, to continue living through hope and to resort to suicide. People who choose to live through hope are living blindly, according to Camus. This is because life has no meaning and that continuously seeking purposes to live is simply futile. On the other hand, for people who choose suicide, they already believe that life has no purpose and they give up on it due to the thinking that it is not worth living (2-3). He then proceeded that there must be an alternative to the two. That is to accept the hardships and meaninglessness of life yet continue to living life (4). In this part of the essay, Camus was implying that life is naturally difficult and that suicide is an option which man takes when he thinks of it as not worth living. He presented in the latter his alternative view of life, the concept of absurdity, which is to continue living by accepting that life is difficult.

Camus then related his explanation on the absurdity of life by narrating the story of Sisyphus from Greek mythology. The story was basically about the kidnapping of a female mortal named Aegina by Jupiter, the king of all gods. Sisyphus witnessed this event and, having the knowledge about the kidnapping, offered to tell Aegina’s father, Aesopus, about what

happened in exchange that he would give access to water to his citadel. Due to this, he was punished by the gods and brought him to the underworld to suffer an eternal curse. This curse was to roll up a boulder of rock up the mountain which eventually rolls back to the bottom. Sisyphus was cursed to this punishment for an eternity (23). According to Camus, this curse can also be observed in man's life. Sisyphus experiences hope as he reaches the peak of the mountain, but then it would eventually be crushed by the harsh reality that he has to roll it back up again and again ceaselessly. Life works in the same way. Man keeps hoping for good outcomes, but the hopes which he envisions are constantly toppled by the world (being a hostile environment). Camus also added that, during the moments when Sisyphus strides back to the bottom of the mountain to retrieve the rock boulder, not only the feeling of sorrow is felt. He stated that joy can also be experienced during those moments (24). Although despair is felt by Sisyphus due to the inevitable fate of ceaseless labor, he may come to accept this fate given to him by the gods. Camus explained that when man is aware of his fate, the feeling of joy can be experienced. This is because all hope is set aside, knowing that life will not get any better. Camus concluded in his work, "one must imagine Sisyphus happy," which can be implied is his message that fate must be accepted because no other aspect of life will bring joy to man. To summarize Camus's explanation on existence, man must come to accept the fate he has, otherwise he will continuously be hurt by the harshness of reality. Man will eventually feel happiness as he learns to accept his fate.

Analyzing the works of both Marcel and Camus, flaws can definitely be observed in their works. Both philosophers shared the same view on suicide. They both did not see it as an appropriate act and urged that man to continue living. Their works also agreed that life has no

inherent purpose. Their views differed, however, as to how man must make up for the lack of meaning.

In the existentialist view of Marcel, beliefs are centered on individuality. Man is given the free will to believe in what he wants to believe in. He also went on to say that the meanings made by man can be distorted due to the quality of obsessive ownership which reality creates. He stated that there is an inevitable tendency for man to become controlled by this quality of being possessive, resulting to a distorted view of existence itself. Based on my personal take, this is indeed true, and that is also the reason why there are religions which serve to guide man away from the distorted view that the society itself makes. Moving on to the work of Camus, he believed that man must stop looking for meaning out of existence since life is really devoid of it and that man must learn to accept the fate he is given. His view limits the capabilities of man to and gives him the thinking that he cannot achieve more than what he already has. Absurdism precludes the possibility of man to hope for a better life and forces him to accept the fate he is given. This concept of absurdity is countered by the philosophical work of Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. According to Aristotle in Book I of his work, he stated that man is free to do any actions, and these actions are always targeted to some form of good. These always vary in purpose, thus having different interpretations of goodness for people's different perspectives. However, when these actions of man are cumulatively considered, they are actually targeted at achieving the highest form of good which is universal to everyone (3-4). In Aristotle's terms, the good pertains to what the majority or the entirety of society agrees on. Putting his work into context, man is free to do anything, even though the goodness of his actions vary in perspective, and does not have to be tied up to a certain fate or destiny to achieve the highest form of

goodness. Regardless of what man does out of his own free will, he is still contributing in some way that attains the greatest form of good.

In relation to existence, another claim which Camus made in his absurdist view was on the source of happiness. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he argued that happiness is only obtained when man starts to accept his fate. The fate of man, as Camus described, was a futile and miserable one. This is contradictory to Aristotle's ideology once again. It was stated in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that happiness is only gained if a desired outcome is achieved. Every action of man has an end goal which he aims to accomplish. Every time a certain action or activity fulfills its desired goal, happiness is achieved (5-6). In the absurdist view, man is entitled a miserable fate. He will only feel joy when he accepts the fate that he was forced to have. This concept is flawed. Man, in general, does not feel happiness if he himself cannot attain the end goals he desires. In support of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, happiness is only achieved when a desired outcome is accomplished, which contrasts the absurdist view that precludes the presence of goals.

To conclude on the different ideologies by Gabriel Marcel and Albert Camus on existential purpose, the existentialist and absurdist views can be both used in making one's own interpretation of existential purpose. Upon analyzing both philosophical views, Marcel's philosophy on existence is the most acceptable from the two. Man does indeed have the freedom to choose what to believe in. The reality which man lives in may distort his beliefs but there are religions to address that. Although it can be agreed that life lacks an inherent purpose (which both philosophers believed), it is more appropriate to dictate existence based on free will, not on fate. Man lives in a problematic and hostile world, but there are always things in life that gives him reason to continue living. A human being always needs something to believe in, no matter

how ridiculous it may be, because the world will continue to wear him down. Man needs hope, and it is up to him seek for things to hope for. For the concept of happiness, it is innate in man that happiness is achieved from end goals, not in the mere acceptance of life being miserable. This can be seen in the society today. The sense of joy can be experienced when what man aspires to attain is accomplished, including achieving dreams and aspirations as well as finding solutions to problems. Lastly, on the idea of suicide, it can also be agreed that it as an inappropriate act. As it was described by Marcel as “the disposal of my life,” to commit suicide is to objectify the body as it were some material thing without relative importance (82, 87). Existence does not have a purpose, but it is something that must not be wasted. After the completion of a human being’s existence in the world, man is still uncertain as to what would happen, but it can be made certain that the life bestowed upon man must be treated with worth.

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