

Exploring The 'Explanatory Model Of Life': A Comparative Analysis Of Socrates And Nozick On The Nature And Meaning Of Existence

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Abstract

This paper titled, "Socrates and Nozick's Nature of Human Existence: Investigating the Explanatory Paradigm of Human Existence" aims to do a comparative analysis of two influential thinkers from two different era in human history. The paper examines how Socrates, an ancient Greek philosopher, and Robert Nozick, a modern philosopher, understood fundamental questions about human existence, purpose, and living a meaningful life. Socrates focused on gaining knowledge and self-discovery through questioning and moral reflection, while Nozick explored libertarian ethics and individual self-sufficiency (autonomy). By comparing these two philosophical postulations, the paper aims to highlight how our ideas about existence and human purpose have evolved and developed over time and across different philosophical traditions. This analysis intends to foster a greater appreciation for the diverse philosophical beliefs that shape our understanding of life in the modern world.

Keywords: Socrates, Nozick, Explanatory Model, Life, Death, God

Date of Submission: 13-10-2023

Date of Acceptance: 23-10-2023

I. Introduction

This paper shall discuss what shall be called explanatory models of life. The intent is to examine how individuals read and interpret the meanings of life or how a meaningful life/existence can be achieved. Two works shall be comparatively expounded; they are Plato's account of Socrates' defense at the Athenian law court, *Apology*, and Robert Nozick's "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life". It looked at the views of these figures. It shall be argued that Robert Nozick's position is plausible.

Socrates' Perspective of Life

Apology is one of Plato's dialogues in which the accounts of the trial of Socrates are given. Socrates has been brought to the Athenian Court of law on two count charge, which are that he has been preoccupied with corrupting the minds of the young and believing in deities of his own invention as against the gods recognized by the State (*Apology*, 24b). These charges he attempts to defend himself against. One of them (the charges) is further compounded by way of saying he is guilty of criminal meddling. While he tries to inquire into things between the earth and in the sky and strengthen weaker arguments to enable them defeat stronger ones. He equally teaches others to follow his example (*Apology*, 19b-c).

The above serves as prologue to the discussion to be embarked upon here. The defence of Socrates is not a mere defence but attempt to teach morals and establish diligence. Socrates' assertion that is being xrayed here has been influenced by Apollonian dictum of 'know thyself' (Betegh, 2006: 89).¹ This is individualistic in content and approach. The dictum is associated with the Delphin god of Apollo, one of the gods of Athens that Socrates believes in. Socrates must have perceived the self-centredness, and egoistic tendency in this dictum and then would want to advance on it but not necessarily condemning it outrightly. By

¹ Gábor Betegh, "Diogenes of Apollonian" in Donald M. Borchert (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Second Edition, Vol. 3, (New York: Thomson Gale, 2006), 89

way of doing this, he would want to affirm his belief in the gods of Athens, including the Delphin, which the Apollonian dictum is associated with. Again, he is to strengthen the role of individuals among his people. In other words, he has to countenance the existence of individuals in a social environment. In view of this, the Socrates' dictum of '...an unexamined life is not worth living' has two implications. On the one hand, it is directed towards the individual, who as a matter of necessity, has to examine his own life. On the other hand, the lives of others have to be examined. All is for the purpose of meaningful existence.² It is in this regard that Socrates declares that he considers himself "leading the philosophical life, examining [himself] and others (*Apology*, 28e).

It is obvious, from the above, that Socrates is not going to be individualistic in his approach. Again, one can further interpret that apart from examining oneself and others separately, the examination can be done relationally. In this regard, it is apt to say that both are individually necessary but jointly sufficient. This be the case, examining oneself is also examining others. At another level of interpretation, examining others is doing same to oneself.³ What this means is that Socrates' dictum is advancement on the Apollonian dictum, in spite of the fact that the latter had great influence on the former. Again, Socrates dictum of an unexamined life is not worth living (*Apology*, 28e) is all encompassing as it deals with humans at social level. To move it further, it can be extended to the beings before, such as ancestors, since they once lived among their people in the society. Their lives could be put on the pedestal of examination. Having said this, Socrates indirectly lays the standard/paradigm upon which the examination should be based.

Three essential ingredients shall be expounded here. These are meant to be used as yardstick in the course of examining either oneself or others separately or jointly. They are wisdom, truth and death. Each of these is linked with others, such that in a way the three may be difficult to separate.

Socrates notes that while death is certain, it is a blessing and not evil as many would have seen it.⁴ He sees death from two perspectives. One is annihilation and two is a change of place, which is described as migration of the soul from this place to another place (*Apology*, 40c). A good man who sees himself as somebody important is bordered about life and death. This means that while it is true that death may cause havoc for those the deceased leaves behind, it may be a blessing for the deceased himself.⁵ It is instrument of transition to be among the good ones, including best judges (*Apology*, 41a). This can be interpreted to mean that even when one is still alive, he considers death as a way of re-uniting with the good ones. This further explains the initial analysis of Socrates' dictum where it has been said that examining oneself and others can be extended to examining the dead (ancestors). No one will know if an ancestor is that good or otherwise except such ancestor has been examined. This time, he may be examined vis-à-vis his relatives or the community he left behind as a whole. For one who aspires to join the good people when he dies, he must be thinking of doing good like the personalities he wishes to join.

The second one is wisdom. Socrates has declared that the act of exercising anxiety of death is an equivalent of not having wisdom (*Apology*, 29a). It means that part of human activities make him happy and for his existence in both abodes to be guaranteed is to expect death, but not to fear or be afraid of it. This is because he knows that it will come. It is in, and through death, that one can be happy. While Socrates believes in human wisdom, for instance of his kind, he affirms that real wisdom is the property of God (*Apology*, 23a).

The third ingredient, which is truth, is very important. There is a synergy between wisdom, not to be afraid of death and truth. He who is not afraid of death must be ready to pay attention to both truth and understanding (*Apology*, 29c). It is in this that the perfection of the soul rests. Again, only that character who is wise has what it takes to do this. Eternal truth can only be when the soul joins his kin and kit in the intelligible world.⁶ Hence, staying here is like not accomplishing one's mission. The above are the major essential ways through which one can examine life, either of oneself or that of others. Anything devoid of these is prohibited and such will be considered as act that is wrong and can cause short life. For instance, it is not advisable to join politics. Even if one attempts to do so, it should be with the intention of correcting illegalities and wrong (*Apology*, 31e). Examining oneself in this way is that which ensures and guarantees sustainability of existence.

Robert Nozick's Perspective of Life

Robert Nozick's paper is a contribution to what life could mean. While it is supposedly agreed that meaning of life cannot be expressed in a word or discussed by an individual, it will be taken that Nozick's contribution is one of those works that have direct indexation on the meaning of life. His work serves, at least, two purposes here. One, it appears, and can be interpreted thus, as relevant to Socrates' idea about life, given the fact that Socrates' theme, as chosen in this study, is a life that is worth living. Comparing Socrates' and Nozick's works, a semblance can be drawn; life that is meaningful. This is the sense in which both can be interpreted. No doubt each of them has chosen different approaches, but how has Nozick looked at life? What constitutes a meaningful life for him?

Robert Nozick identified and discusses various elements that constitute meaning of life. For the purpose of this study, attempt shall be made to selectively discuss some of the elements that are considered useful here. The reason for this supposed selection is to look at his work vis-à-vis that of Socrates since they are both considered to comparably have some similarities. It is to be noted that their striking differences are not totally overlooked. Nevertheless, they may not be absolutely focused on. This does not mean that they may not be mentioned when and where necessary.

Death, God's plan and teleology have been chosen as element to be discussed with the view to analysing the theme. Death by every human, irrespective of one's cultural and religious background, is conceived from different backgrounds. The commonest among them is that of negative perception of death. This is because death truncates one's supposed meaning of life. It is a process whereby the mortality of humans

is established (Nozick, 69). One of the desires of many individuals is to live happily and experience a long life. Even, when one does not live a happy life, he still does not wish that he has his existence truncated. He still hopes that better days are ahead. However, this is just a perspective. Another perspective is that death itself makes life meaningful (Nozick, 70). For this category of people, it is the assurance that death will come that makes them do that wish they want to do. They quickly want to achieve in life so as not to have come to the world without any impact. For these people, there is no need to fear death.

Ability to achieve makes meaning to people. This is what Nozick tags 'traces' (Nozick, 71). While it is true that the dead no longer exists in the mortal world, he is still traceable to some remarkable footprints and legacies left behind. These make him an immortal being. In fact, he may transcend from a mere deceased to becoming an ancestor. This time, his ancestorship now becomes a shared status. In this regard, his contributions and good deeds would have made him an immortal being. Hence, for Nozick, traces will make one achieve this fit. Again, his children make this possible; a childless being may not be able to have any trace. It is felt like it should not be separated.

The second element is God's plan (Nozick, 74). This element seems to be theistic in character, such that one can say that people's existence is explainable in the light of God. A strong belief here is that the God mentioned may neither be Judeo-Christian, Islamic nor any of these theistic conceptions of the Supreme Being. Why this is made clear is for anybody not to start raising the theistic of his existence (Nozick, 74). But, let us assume that there is a being called God, and this being has some plans for individuals. The individuals fulfil the plan of this God. This is a condition for a meaningful life. It is as if one does his things as planned by this God.

The last element is teleology. If it is granted, for the sake of argument, that a being called God has some plans, the plans may then be considered to be the purpose for which the existence of such individual has been sustained. The purpose of an individual's existence might be by living a virtuous life, so as to serve as good example for others to emulate. The moment one fails to live a good and virtuous life, the purpose is defeated.

Having expounded the views of Socrates and Robert Nozick, it appears that there is a connection between their views that allow for quick but easy decision that one may be considered a rejoinder to the other. In other words, Nozick's contribution may be a rejoinder to Socrates'. Nozick may be doing that, I want to assume, having discovered that Socrates has left some things unattended to. Hence, Nozick's contribution may be an explication of Socrates ideas. What brings about this assumption is a somehow sharp, but seemingly silent, mention of Socrates (Nozick, 69). One would have thought that their works have nothing in common. But having looked at Nozick's work, it appears, apparently, that it is a contribution to the discussion of Socrates. Again, what further aids the suggestion is the discussion of death as key to the meaning of life both in Socrates and Nozick.

Between Socrates and Nozick

Socrates and Nozick have devoted their energies in discussing death as having significant role to play in human existence and life. Both agree that death is not something to be feared as the mention of death has positive impact. For Socrates, death encourages individuals to do good so as to enable them meet the good people that have gone. Nozick's view is not entirely different as thinking about death is what propels individuals to do good work such that they could have good traces. This can be linked to the idea of teleology which is evident in both works. For Socrates, he is working according to God's plans. This is such that he acts according to the directive from God. And one of the directives is to live a philosophical life. In other words, failure to live such life is tantamount to not achieving one's purpose.

That both share some ideas in common does not mean one would not be preferred to another. Again, it gives one the opportunity to choose. In this regard, I think Robert Nozick's position is more convincing. To start with, Socrates oratory speech has some elements of emotion and pity; hence, his examination of life being worth for living or not is premised on emotion. Again, he condemns this world as if the world is so worthless that it is only in the heavens that good things reside. Bear in mind that no one knows how the heaven looks like.⁷ For him to have condemned worldly activities including joining politics, even if it is with good intention, it can be said that he recommends this kind of life on the basis of his financial and social status. One cannot isolate himself from his community. Individuals are duty bound to participate in the activities of his immediate environment. What if this is a way to examine oneself and others.

II. Conclusion

Nozick has been able to establish the need for purpose. I think purpose driven activities make one relevant in his community. Teleology, for Nozick, is key to his discussion. When critically looked at, it is the nexus that binds all of them together. One cannot be discussed without linking it up to teleology. This makes his work viable and tenable.

In conclusion, Robert Nozick's analysis is preferred and plausible compared to Socrates'. One major

reason is that while with Nozick teleology, one has a target which he pursues in life. That which is targeted is the purpose. It equally means there is a focus. This kind of focus is the one that usually has both vision and mission. He who does not have a focus embraced by mission and vision is without a purpose. Such a person is not accorded the desired recognition and respect in life. It may even surprise one that such an individual wanders around without having any particular destination. This is because reaching one's destination in life is part of purposeful life. Even, when death now comes, he has no reason to fear for he can now be traced to his purposeful life.

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