



Emmanuel Umeh's Notion of Life: A Reflection on the Drama of Life and the Life of Drama

Adekunle A. Ibrahim PhD
Department of Philosophy
University of Uyo, Uyo

and

Ikemesit J. Nkanta
Department of Philosophy
University of Uyo, Uyo

Abstract

This paper is a reflection on the dramatic nature of human life as gleaned from Emmanuel Umeh's notion of life espoused in his book *Innermost Philosophical Reflections on the Human Condition*. A solicitous look at the human life revealed that life is definable within the purview of a chain of reactionary actions and events. Yet, in the face of challenges and provocations, human beings are quick to say "I don't want drama in my life!" But, can there be a drama free life? Is life meaningful and eventful without being dramatic? What does it mean to live a dramatic life? Is drama an ontological condition of living? These questions set the tone for this paper as it explored the dramatic nature of human life within the framework of Umeh's notion of life. In order to achieve this objective, the paper presented Umeh's biographical sketch, it clarified the concepts drama and life. It presented Umeh's notion of life. In addition, it established the link between drama and life by exploring the two dramatic dimensions of life: the drama of life and the life of drama. It concluded that living a balanced and rationally meaningful life is to, on the one hand, acknowledge and respect the necessary and constant events of life beyond our control and on the other hand, to rationally take control of our choices of actions which fall within the realm of our control with firm understanding of the dramatic nature of life.

Keywords: Drama, Life, Drama of Life, Life of Drama and Human Condition.

Introduction

The expression “life is full of drama” captures the sequential nature of events and actions that define human life. Life is therefore definable within the context of these realities that are identifiable in synonymity with the experiences that shape human life. So, to live is to have events and actions causally manifesting in our daily experiences. The attempt to make sense of these causally connected events and actions in human life has led to a litany of descriptions of what life entails. These descriptions usually mirror life from peculiar experiences and challenges encountered by individual(s) at different point and time in human history. For instance, life is said to be a battle, a struggle, a bitter or sweet experience. Life is also described as tough as well as smooth depending on the narrator’s perspective and particular experiences. In whichever way it is described, what is constant is that life is inherently challenging and characterized by a mix of personal search for meaning, personal struggles (health, relationships, finances) and unavoidable emotional roller coaster.

However, in the face of these defining characterization of life, humans still exhibit a sense of optimism that blinds them towards this universal and unavoidable fact of life. This is underscored by the unrealistic expectation that life should go the way they wish it to go. And whenever the reality of existence goes contrary to this expectation, they feel frustrated and fall into depression and despair. In a nutshell, life becomes an endless series of events and actions that generates a chain of reactions. From this standpoint, this paper explores the two dramatic dimensions of life: the drama of life and the life of drama with the former accounting for facts of existence beyond human control while the latter representing the choices and actions within our control. In view of this, the paper locates the meaning, purpose and what matters most within the context of these two dimensions of life as implied by Umeh’s notion of life. In order to understand the intellectual climate and development of Umeh, his biographical sketch is presented immediately after the introduction before the subject of the paper is explored further.

A Biographical Sketch of Emmanuel Chukwuemeka Umeh

Emmanuel Chukwuemeka Umeh was born into the family of late Mr. Emmanuel U. Umeh and late Mrs. Cecilia Umeh of Akwu-Akokwa, Ideato North Local Government Area of Imo State Nigeria on March 29, 1966 roughly six months before the beginning of the Nigerian-Biafran civil war that ended in 1970. He had his primary education at Immaculate Conception Seminary, Ahiaeke Umuahia. After his secondary education, he was retained as a student-teacher to teach Mathematics, Geography and Agricultural Science. In 1987 he was sent to Bigard Memorial Seminary, Ikot-Ekpene, now St. Joseph Major Seminary, Ikot-Ekpene for his

philosophical studies. After his graduation, he was sent to Annunciation Junior Seminary, Amaudara for Diocesan Assignment where he also taught Mathematics and Geography.

He started his theological studies in 1992 at St. Joseph Major Seminary, Ikot-Ekpene. In 1994, he was sent to Austria by the then Bishop of Aba diocese, late Rt. Rev. Vincent Valentine Ezeonyia, C.S.Sp. to continue with his studies. He was ordained a Catholic Priest in Graz, Austria in 1998 after the completion of his Master's study in Theology. He then proceeded to study Communication in London School of Journalism and majored in Journalism and News Writing. Umeh got his doctoral and post-doctoral degrees in from Karl-Franzens University, Gras, Ausria where he also lectured for few years before relocating to Germany. In Germany, Umeh served as a pastor, teacher and lecturer. In 2020, He voluntarily returned to Nigeria to be part of the team of formators in Seat of Wisdom Major Seminary, Ariam, Umuahia. In 2025, Umeh bagged a Master of Arts degree in Philosophy at the prestigious University of Uyo, Uyo. He majored in Systematic Theology and Epistemology and has published more than ten (10) books and several articles in both theological and philosophical journals. He is the initiator and editor-in-chief of the *Weischiet Philosophical Journal* Ariam in affiliation with the philosophy department of Imo State University, Owerri.

As an outstanding theosophical scholar, Umeh has contributed immensely to our understanding of the human condition through his theological and philosophical works such as *The Promotion of Human Rights and Social Justice: A Call to Liberation Theology for the Church in Nigeria*, *The African Theology of Solidarity*, *African Theology of Solidarity and Religion of Self-Deceit: The Nigerian Experience*, *African Theology of Solidarity in Addressing Religious Freedom in Nigeria*, *Injustice and War on Terrorism and Innermost Philosophical Reflections on the Human Condition*.

What is Life?

Etymologically, the word "life" originates from the old English *lif* meaning "body, life or existence" and the proto-Germanic *liba* meaning "life" or "body". It is rooted in the proto – Indo – European *Leyp* meaning "to stick, to adhere" which evolved to mean "to retain, continue, or stay". It is historically associated with the concept of a living, physical body. For this reason, the word "life" has retained its core meaning of "the condition of being alive."

Scientifically, life is seen as a complex, self-sustaining and evolving process characterized by metabolism, growth, reproduction and the ability to respond to environmental stimuli. Although, there is no single definition that fully satisfies scientists, it is commonly understood as a highly organized state that separates living beings from inorganic matter.

Philosophically, the meaning of life is beyond the literal, etymological and scientific/biological characterization of being. It refers to the subjective experiences of the time between birth and death and the meaning individuals assign to their own existence within this period. It is therefore seen by Ibrahim as the object of one's reflective consciousness (2025:92). For this reason, the question "does life have meaning" or "what is the meaning of life?" is said to be the defining concern of philosophy, that is, the issue that provides philosophy's *raison d'être*. In this sense, according to Ibrahim, "philosophy is conceived as an attempt to understand the human condition and our place in the universe" (2021:51). Thus, life in a philosophical sense refers to the purpose and meaning of the gap between birth and death. In response to this, philosophers have taken three major approaches to unravel the meaning of life. The first approach is the theistic account which holds that there exists a pre-established relationship between man and God which defines the meaning of life. The second approach is the metaphysical account which seeks an all-encompassing perspective that transcends the human situation and in terms of which human life can be given a meaning. The third approach is the nihilist or pessimist account which claims that human life has no meaning since there are no ultimate values worth pursuing (Lawhead 634).

From the foregoing, it is clear that life refers to the condition of being alive, the quality of being a living being and ultimately the meaning and purpose of the gap between being born and being buried. For this reason, this paper explores the conditions of living a rationally compliant life in the face of the drama that defines human existence within the context of Umeh's notion of life as espoused in his book *Innermost Philosophical Reflections on Human Condition*.

What is Drama?

Etymologically, the term "drama" comes from the Greek word *dran* meaning "action" which is derived from "to do" or "to act". In this sense, drama is most often defined as a pattern of words and actions having the potential for "doing" or "becoming" living words and actions. (Barranger 129). This explains why at the centre of any account of drama is the twin concepts: word and action as drama is written primarily to be performed, not read. In view of the centrality of the two terms "word" and "action" to the meaning of drama, the technical terms "dialogue" and "stage" becomes definitive of drama. On the printed page, drama appears as dialogue words arranged in sequence to be spoken by actors (Barranger 129). For this reason, drama is simply seen as stage dialogue, stage dialogue is created by the playwright while the actors speak it out in performance. Thus, performability becomes the hallmark of drama as it serves as the link between the playwright's words and the actor's speech.

Drama has also been described as an imitation of life. This description of drama is traceable to the Greek philosopher, Aristotle. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle advances the idea that a work of art is an imitation of the possible or probable, not of something actual only. (Reese 32). All arts, for Aristotle are forms of imitation or mimesis. From this Aristotelian perspective, drama is simply portrayed as an imitation or reflection of human actions and events. It is therefore a literary composition in verse or prose intended to portray life or character or tell a story usually involving conflicts and emotions through action and dialogue and typically designed for theatrical performance through actors, on a stage and before an audience. This means that drama is adapted to delineate life and human activities by means of presenting various dialogues and actions among a group of character. In view of this, drama is simply the mirror of human life as it captures or pictures, although in a sequentially adapted pattern, the totality of human conditionalities of existence. Thus, every drama is an imitation that confronts the mystery of human behaviour in order to contribute to a sense of well-being and to an understanding of ourselves and others. In a nutshell, drama is an imitation of human actions and events.

Emmanuel Umeh's Notion of Life

In his book, *Innermost Philosophical Reflections on the Human Condition*, Umeh presents life as a phenomenon that defies human comprehension as he sees life as "the expression of the reality of the ontological realism of the present". (xii). By this, he means that life is a collection of the conditions of existence in terms of events and actions that are causally determined. In this sense, he captures life as a phenomenon beyond human cognitive circumference. This is because individual(s) are simply limited entities within the web of existence. As such, life for him is reality existing independently of specific human mind, life or observations. It has a fixed, objective structure and coordinating forces regardless of whether they are perceived or conceptualized by humans. In his words:

Life is not what you think it is. Life is more than the thought of your assumption. Life is deeper than the deepest of any human thought or human condition. Life is the expression of the reality of the ontological realism of the present. This means that life should be lived at the alter of the present reality. (xii).

Drawing from the limitedness of human thought in relation to life, Umeh points to the absoluteness of life as a reality beyond human perceptual process. This according to him is due to the fact that "the logic of life is not perceptively explainable with the logic of human perception" (xii). The human mind operates

within its inherent limitedness that is occasioned by the deceptiveness of human sensation. In its reception of sensory information, the senses are bedeviled by its pragmatic mechanisms such as abstraction and synthesis that structure received information to fit within its receptive capability. By so doing, it is practically impossible for the mind to receive unstructured sensory information to create an understanding of life. This simply points to the pragmatic subjectivism of human perception which is susceptible to errors. A recognition of this situation is an affirmation and authentication of the life of realism. This is the reality of being real to the situation's true reality. (Umeh, xiii). Thus, to acknowledge this distinction between the reality of life and human limitation of its understanding is to remain humble to the majesty of truth about human condition. Failure to resonate this in one's memory is to give room to the activation of negativities in existence. In his words:

The attainability of authentic life in the phenomenal world of experience is to be realistically real to the life of experience, its subduing negation is fundamental to the life of negativity because one negates the reality of experiential reality by affirming falsehood, living a life of denial is the authentication of unfulfilled life (xiii).

Following from the above, Umeh points to the fact that the unfulfilled life of the present is the result of the failure to learn from the negative negativities of the past. According to him, the actuality of the negative experience of the past without authentic, honest evaluation is to cement its repetition with more devastating consequences. (xiii) So, on the purpose of life, Umeh has this to say:

Life is geared towards human fulfillment. The fulfillment of life is not replaceable with the accumulation of material "goodies" equitable to monetary acquisition. It is not about the seeming fulfilment of the material needs and wants; it is not the claimingness of the claimed fulfilment. The genesis of any fulfilled life is to realistically attend to the true nature of life. (xiii – xiv).

If according to Umeh, life becomes fulfilled when we attend to the true nature of life, then, the logical questions to ask here is "what is the true nature of life?" In response to this question, Umeh has this, to say: "Life in its nature is multifariously faceted. The various facets of life, with its gradation. Interestingly, the majority of the world population conceives a fulfilled life as a life without want, a life devoid of difficulty, a life in plenty, and a life of attainment of all attainable material needs." (xiv) In a bid to drive home the point that life in its true nature is a collection of

multidimensional experiences, Umeh makes a comparative allusion between the nature of human life and the nature of a delicious cake. In his words:

comparably, the nature of life is likened to a delicious cake, which is very captivating to the eyes. The odour emanating from it pierces the nosily of the nose, waters the tongues from the deepness of the throat and ignites the fire of want from the elasticity of the belly. The quest for cake, the wish to have a bit of it and its deliciousness can be so intensive that one may no longer recognize that most individual ingredients for the preparation of the delicious cake are in themselves not palatable, and some could be hazardous to human life. (xiv).

In real life, Umeh asserts that just like a delicious cake has unpalatable individual condiments that the proportionate mixture results in a delicious cake so also is the case that all the components of life are equally indispensable in building a unique personality. The true nature of life incorporates all the realism of life. This includes the ups and downs, positive and negative as well as good and bad experiences. Thus, the negational denial of any component of human life or condition is equaled to an effective journey to self-denial and self-alienation. In effect, life is like a rainbow with many shades of colour that gives it its essence. For this reason, life is definable within the context of its flip-flop manifestations. Umeh succinctly captures this rainbow-like description of life as follows:

Any disappointment or negative experience in the life of any human person has some inherent positive contribution to the person's life journey. So, ups and downs in life, the disappointments, happiness, unhappiness, failure, success, etc., are actual necessities in a person's life. So, human condition should not be evaluated solely from the positive sides of life or from negative aspects. All put together, present the total personality of a person. (xv).

Umeh concludes his notion of life by noting that no event in human life lacks a positive effect. The ability to learn from all life experiences is a sign of maturity. Every experience should be educational. There is no experience in life that is devoid of any positive aspect. It is the function of the intellect to glean out the positiveness of any perceived negative experience and its gloomy manifestation. He therefore admonishes that we should take life easy as there is no human condition that is permanent and no bad situation is insurmountable. Every stage in human life is a

necessary step to human fulfillment and we should be rational enough to understand this fact of life and be ready to take a positive evaluation of all human condition.

The Dramatic Nature of Human Life

A critical look at human life reveals that it is characterized by inherent series of intense events, actions and emotional transition from birth to death. It is characterized by a struggle of meaning, purpose and survival often involving deep emotions like love and joy which mirror dramatic performances. In this sense, “to exist is to act; to act is to be dramatic”. This means that the human life is inherently dramatic as persons exist through actions and events that are in constant change as life is in itself a perpetually unpredictable, uncontrollable and unstoppable chain of events. For this reason, life is not just a random event; it is a scripted chain of events in which we are nothing more than actors on the stage of existence. It is inherently a dramatic phenomenon because it forces us to navigate profoundly intense contrasts of joy and sorrow, triumph and setbacks, control and uncertainties. Thus, life is a sequence of events that are regulated by fundamental conditions of existence that all living organisms succumb to and live by. In human life, there are certain constants or uncontrollable conditions which do not respect any individual differences or peculiarity. These are inherent and unavoidable elements of existence that individual(s) cannot directly manage, change or determine. Accepting these factors, the way they are, gives us the internal strength crucial for reducing anxiety and eliminating unnecessary fear as well as building resilience. These uncontrollable conditions of existence include: time, past events, aging process, circumstances of life (genetic makeup, choice of parents, place of birth), uncertainty of life, reality of death, inescapable pain and disappointment, subconscious mind and other people’s belief, thoughts and actions. This phase of life is what this paper describes as the drama of life. It is so described because it is a naturally written events that only needs to be acted out by an individual with the pain of simultaneously acting multiple roles (parent, child, sibling, friend, professional and so on). In this play, the actor’s (the human being) role is simply to put to action the playwright’s stipulated sequence of events without any exception. It is important to note that every step happens in real time as what is done cannot be reversed which raises the stakes and makes every choice intensely consequential. This explains why either we like it or not life will always take its course independent of our wish or what we think. We step into a new unrehearsed script every day managing both our own expectations and the ever-changing external world in the face of unchanging constants of human condition. Accordingly, Umeh says “life is not what you think it is... life is deeper than the

deepest of any human thought of condition". It is simply beyond our control as we are simply actors in the stage of life. The ancient stoic philosopher Epictetus captures this dramatic nature of life clearly when he writes that:

Remember that you are an actor in a play, which is as the playwright wants it to be: short if he wants it short, long if he wants it long. If he wants you to play a beggar, play even this skillfully, or a cripple, or a public official, or a private citizen. What is yours is to play the assigned part well. But to choose it belongs to someone else (16)

The above quotation points to the fact that the drama of life entails the uncontrollable phase of life that we just are bound to live in submission to the assigned role and stipulation. Any attempt to deviate from this is a consequent denial of the fundamental conditions of living with a disastrous series of consequential events. This simply re-echoes Umeh's submission earlier that life is the expression of the reality of the ontological realism of the present. That is, our life becomes peaceful and meaningful if only we can live in accordance with our assigned realities in terms of the conditionalities of our existence. Thus, trying to force our expectations on life is an invitation to the negativities of the drama of life which throws our life into a series of confusing, perplexing and destructive events. For this reason, Epictetus admonishes that "we should not seek to have events happen as we want them to, but instead want them to happen as they do happen, and our life will go well" (13). This agrees with Umeh's idea that the genesis of any fulfilled life is to realistically attend to the true nature of life. That is, the pursuance of our desires and wants should be in tandem with what fits into the larger picture of our role as actors in the drama of life.

Apart from the uncontrollable phase of life, there is also the other phase of life that falls within the realm of our control. This refers to the factors and behaviours within an individuals' voluntary control that can be managed to maintain health, examine belief systems and improve quality of life. Thus, while we may not have control over the events that determine our existence (the drama of life) we do have control over how we approach them. But, how we approach things is determined by how we are able to distinguish between rational and irrational decision making. Rational decision is the ability to take an informed decision on the phase of life within one's control in line with the principles controlling the uncontrollable phase of life while irrational decision are choices made in contradiction to the natural order of things. Taking irrational decisions or pursuing desires and wants outside the understanding of the two dramatic phases of life is an invitation to existential despair and daily calamities. The idea that life should be stress free, struggle free, devoid of difficulty and filled with material adornments is an irrational, unrealistic and myopic

expectation of what life is and should be. This is the type of thinking that puts millions of people into crisis of existence as reality usually shows the foolishness of such thinking. The life crisis generated from irrational choices leads to unpalatable drama in life. This is what is referred to here as the life of drama. That is, a life filled with series of frustrating events as a result of irrational choices and actions determined by unrealistic expectations due to lack of understanding of or failure to acknowledge the natural dynamics of existence. Life should be lived from a comprehensive acceptance of the necessary dimensions of life. The sweet and bitter experiences of life give us a complete nature of life as the good and bad, the ups and downs; as well as the desirable and undesirable experiences give us a realistic, rich and humanly fulfilling life. This is because the life of plenty may not appreciate that of scarcity while the healthy life may not understand the value of good health except it taste illness. This roller coaster of life gives it the multifarious flavor that defines its ontological precondition. According to Umeh, life is like a delicious cake prepared from unpalatable ingredients that individually may be hazardous for human consumption. But, when put together in the right proportion bring forth a deliciously edible piece of cake. For this reason, life is a rainbow with numerous colour that defines its multifarious richness. And as such, we need to acknowledge this and be ready to embrace it in its ontological realism. Failure to admit this fact of life is a consequent self-contradiction of being human and a readiness for a life of drama that ends in frustration, depression and despair. It is therefore instructive to know this and have peace!

Conclusion

This paper sets out to reflectively explore the dramatic nature of life within the purview of Umeh's notion of life as espoused in his book *Innermost Philosophical Reflections on the human Condition*. In order to achieve this objective, the paper clarified the concepts of drama and life. It presents Umeh's notion of life. Furthermore, it established the link between drama and life by exploring the two dramatic dimensions of life: the drama of life and the life of drama. It conceptualizes the former as the non-negotiables and constant fact of human life that every human being is necessarily subjected to in existence such as genetic makeup, choice of parent, place of birth, uncertainties of life, emotional roller coaster and so on. It sees the latter as the fallouts of the choices and actions of individuals based on the unrealistic expectations of what life should be. The paper submits that failure to acknowledge and accept the non-negotiable forces of life and make rational choices within the purview of what is in the realm of human control brings consequential series of excruciating pain, frustration and despair. It sees life as a phenomenon of humbling process demanding that we let go of our attachment to control and embrace the

uncertainty inherent in life. It argues that embracing the dramatic nature of life rather than striving to control its unpredictable plot twists builds resilience, deepens self-awareness and ultimately leads to profound personal growth. It recommends that our choices and actions should be in tandem with rational expectations and the circumference of what is existentially permissible. This is to enthrone peace, tranquility, orderliness, well-being and ultimately meaning and fulfillment in our life. Finally, the paper submits that we acknowledge and embrace the drama of life and learn to avoid the life of drama through taking rationally compliant choices and actions within the circumference of what is existentially permissible.

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