



A Phenomenology of Existential Choice

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Abstract: The great spokesperson of the existentialist movement, Jean Paul Sartre, said that humans are condemned to be free. Whether we like it or not, whether we are even aware of it or not, we are constantly making choices each day. Even the fact that we are still alive at this moment is an indication that we have chosen to live instead of committing suicide. What Sartre did not explicitly state, however, is that not all the little choices that we make can be regarded as existential choices. For a choice to be existential, a number of factors must come into play. In this paper, I would like to enumerate some of the most essential features of existential choice. Using a phenomenological description of essences, I shall demonstrate that for a choice to be regarded as existential, certain key features must be present. These key features would include the following: a full consciousness of the choice, a full awareness not only of what is chosen, but also of what is left out by the choice, a commitment to the choice along with a sense of complete accountability for it, the sense of having shaped one's identity through the choice, the understanding that one cannot go back and undo the choice, and that each choice limits the availability of future choices. I shall describe these key features and explicate them using numerous examples in an attempt to dispel some of the common misconceptions philosophy students have regarding choice in general and existential choice in particular. In the end, I shall show that existentialism is not as frivolous as it initially seems, since one can no longer claim, as some novice existentialist-inspired thinkers do, that "I can choose to be anything I want to be," or that "life is a set of infinite possibilities."

Key words: Existentialism; Phenomenology; Freedom; Choice