



## A Phenomenology of Existential Choice

Gansham T. Mansukhani, Ph.D.  
*De La Salle University*  
*mansukhaniraj@gmail.com*

**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

### INTRODUCTION

The entire existentialist corpus comes in a variety of forms: plays, novels, essays, memoirs, and even grand philosophical treatises. In spite of the differences in approach among them, however, they do share common themes such as alienation, despair, angst, absurdity, individuality, and human freedom (Luper, 2000). Perhaps the strongest feature of existentialism, whether in its theistic form or atheistic one, is its insistence on human freedom. The notion that humans are free and therefore accountable for their actions is an assumption that all existentialists share. One of the main points made

in the entire existential tradition, then, is that human beings, though influenced by both internal and external forces (such as one's genetic makeup or upbringing), are nevertheless free because they have the power to either give ascent to these forces, or to go against them through the sheer act of will. The choices that human beings make are therefore completely their own and cannot be attributed, in the final analysis, to forces beyond their control. This holds true for *every* choice, whether it be trivial or groundbreaking. The preference for chocolate ice cream over vanilla is as much a product of free choice as the decision to marry one person over another; the decision to watch an action film over a drama is as much a product of free choice as the decision to



commit suicide. To say that all human actions, trivial and important alike, is the product of free choice, is to gloss over possible differences among the various types of choices human beings make. Obviously, not all human choices carry the same weight or seriousness. Some choices—like whom to marry, what career to pursue, or whether to pull the plug on a patient on life support—have more significance and carry more weight than choices regarding where to go for breakfast or what film to watch during the weekend.

In this paper, I would like to begin with the assumption that a taxonomy of choices—a classification of choices on the basis of particular criteria—may be informative and useful, since this could provide us with a starting point for attending to those choices that are significant rather than spending time on those which are trivial. In fact we already do this intuitively. Human beings are often caught up and deeply involved with decisions and choices that do make a difference; they do not go about worrying endlessly over the thousand minor decisions made on a daily basis. To do so would be pathological. Of the major decisions that humans make, there are those that can be regarded as *existential*. Examples of such choices abound in the existentialist literature. Sartre speaks, for example, of the young man who has to choose between going to war for his country or staying home to care for his elderly mother (Sartre 1993). In Styron's (1992) novel, *Sophie's Choice*, the main character must decide who between her two children should be sent to the gas chamber for execution by the Nazis. Another example comes from Dostoevsky's (1989) novel *Crime and Punishment*. The main character, Raskolnikov, decides, after careful deliberation, to kill his landlady—a decision that leads to a number of unforeseen consequences. Examples like these provide us with archetypal instances of human choices that could be labeled "existential." An existential choice, then, is a special kind of choice, and must not be confused with other types of choices. Unfortunately, there is no attempt by any of the major existentialists to clearly delineate existential choices from other types of choices. This delineation, I think, is crucial. If it becomes clear to us exactly what an existential choice is, then some of the fundamental features of existentialism should get clearer as well, since so much of the discourse within the existential tradition make reference to this type of choice. I will show, as we proceed, that an exposition of the basic features of existential choices

can also help dispel some of the misconceptions people have about existentialism.

## METHODOLOGY

The method I shall use in this paper is phenomenology. The task of phenomenology, to put it succinctly, is to identify the essential structures of particular experiences. Throughout this paper, I shall use this method to uncover the underlying essential structures of existential choice—those features that *have to be there* for anything at all to be regarded as an existential choice. The method I use may seem circular at first, since I shall begin by imagining clear-cut cases of existential choices, and then performing the eidetic reduction on them. This procedure assumes that I somehow already know what existential choices are even before I analyze them. The circularity here is only temporary though, because it does not end up in a vicious circle. At each step in the phenomenological analysis of existential choice, some underlying feature, which may not have been noticed before, could spring to the surface and enhance our understanding of the subject at hand. In the end, it should be possible to arrive at fresh insights regarding the nature of existential choice, and then to use these insights to have a deeper understanding of the entire existentialist project.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, I shall enumerate the essential features of existential choice. I have numbered them for easy reference.

1. Perhaps the feature that strikes us first about existential choices is that they are non-trivial. Existential choices are choices that make a difference, especially for the person who makes the choice. In what way exactly they make a difference needs to be mapped out phenomenologically, and that is what I shall attempt to do in this entire section. In any case, I think we can all agree, at least intuitively, that existential choices are *significant*. They do not refer to the thousand minor choices we make on a daily basis as we move about in the world. The decision to brush one's teeth a little more quickly in the morning, the decision to take a different route to school on a rainy day, the decision to say "Hi" instead of "Hello" when greeting a friend, the decision to move to the curb at a particular time while walking—all these decisions, free though they



may be—cannot be regarded as existential. They do not carry the seriousness we often reserve for the term “existential”. This distinction is important because it leaves out the majority of choices that human beings make. It also makes our phenomenological task easier since we can now focus only on those choices that are somehow *significant*.

2. Of the significant choices that human beings make, those which seem to fall into the existential category are those that are made *consciously*. There is a sense in which some conscious deliberation is at work before a final decision is made. Of course, the person deliberating between options may not be fully aware of the situation at hand or the of the various implications of the options available, but conscious deliberation, no matter how fleeting, must be there. There are times, of course, when someone may block an existential choice from full awareness, particularly if the consequences of a decision are difficult to deal with. In situations like this, consciousness of the choice may *seem* to be absent. What actually happens is that the awareness of the choice is there, but the person who has made a crucial decision now chooses to attend to something else at the moment in order to momentarily escape from the anxiety that accompanies that choice. Sartre has a term for this. He calls it *bad faith*. To illustrate what he means by bad faith, he gives the example of a woman who does not withdraw her hand from the table when her date makes a move to hold it (Sartre, 2001). The woman has of course made the choice to keep her hand there as a signal that she is interested in the man even if she might still be ambivalent about her feelings for him, but she ignores the significance of the act by thinking of something else and dissociating from the hand, thinking that it is just there like a dead limb, kept on the table without any deliberate intention to leave it there. Sartre would say that at some level, the woman is aware of having made a choice regarding her intentions, but that she masks this awareness by attending to other things instead. If she were pressed about the matter (perhaps by a therapist), the woman would likely admit, though with some hesitation, that she chose to leave her hand on the table for the man to hold. What prevents her from fully attending to the choice and being fully conscious of it is the anxiety that accompanies the choice. This leads us to our third essential feature of existential choices.

3. Existential choices are accompanied by what the existentialists would refer to as *angst*. The

word is often translated as “dread” or “anxiety,” and it is thought to arise from the recognition of personal responsibility for the choices one makes. If a decision that I have made leads to horrible unintended consequences, or if it turns out to be the wrong one, then I have no one to blame but myself. Anxiety, then, can be viewed as something that accompanies the recognition of personal accountability for one’s actions. I think, however, that angst arises from something even deeper. As I shall point out later, angst stems from the recognition not just of personal responsibility, but also from the recognition that an existential choice creates boundaries. Once these boundaries are created, they can no longer be undone. Since boundaries also create identities (boundaries create demarcations and show what is to be included), they also imply that a particular notion of self is being created by one’s choices. The anxiety arises, then, from the conscious awareness of what has been *excluded* when one makes an existential choice. This leads us to the next feature of existential choice.

4. An existential choice entails not only the awareness of the option that is taken, but also an awareness of all the other options that are forever closed off as a result of the choice. To existentially choose one option, then, implies that one has also chosen to *exclude* all other competing options. Some simple examples can illustrate this point. Suppose, for example, that one has chosen to be a poet. To choose this with full awareness of its implications would mean that one has closed off all other career options. Choosing to be a poet is to choose *not* to be a doctor, *not* to be an engineer, *not* to be a lawyer, and so on. Of course these professions are not mutually exclusive, and one can choose two or more at the same time, but that is not the point. The point here is that, because of temporal limitations (we do not live forever), one cannot choose to be everything. The decision to be a doctor implies the possibility that one must also give up one’s dream of being a rock star and a nuclear physicist. The angst that arises from a decision to be a poet or a doctor stems from the recognition that one has chosen to close off other possibilities, rather from just the recognition that one is fully accountable for the choice. Perhaps another example could illustrate this better. Imagine someone who says “I do” in a wedding ceremony. For this marital choice to be existential at all requires that the person who says it also becomes aware of the choice to exclude everyone else as one’s lifelong partner and mate. “I do” implies “I won’t.” In short,



to marry someone is not just to choose one person to be one's lifelong partner; it is also the choice to exclude billions of other possible partners. It is this exclusion of possibilities that produces angst. A choice becomes existential when the set of possibilities that have been closed off is brought to consciousness, and one maintains the choice even in the face of this fact. The person who says "I do" without full awareness of having chosen to exclude everyone else in this decision—the one who has chosen to have his cake and eat it too, so to speak—has chosen frivolously rather than existentially. Existential choices, then, mark out clear boundaries. They are, to use a term made famous by Kierkegaard, either-or decisions. This leads us to the next feature of existential choice.

5. Since an existential choice is one that marks out boundaries—it specifies what sort of possibilities are excluded and therefore no longer included within the inner space marked out by the boundary—it follows that an existential choice has *defining* properties. To say that an existential choice has defining properties is also to say that it serves as an identity marker. In short, it says *what sort of person I am* when I make the choice. The choice *defines* me. As soon as I limit my options by choosing a life of poetry, for example, I have also chosen to identify myself as a poet. It would be my way of saying to the whole world: "Look, this is who I am: a poet." Similarly, when someone chooses to act heroically in a particularly difficult circumstance, the choice to act heroically begins to define that person. Through existential choices, then, human beings choose to be *identified* with particular features, characteristics, labels, or traits. These features are never given in advance (for example, through the genes at birth), but are given as soon as the existential choice is made. It is perhaps for this reason that existential choices are extremely difficult. As soon as they are made, they start to define us, and there is just no way of turning back. If I choose to be a poet, for example, I can no longer turn back and undo the choice. The choice leaves an indelible mark on my identity. If I were to change my mind and decide to become a doctor after a few years of trying my hand at poetry (possibly failing at it), then I am not just any doctor, but rather a doctor who was once a poet—a feature that distinguishes me from all other doctors in my field. This feature of existentialism seems to go against the grain, since many interpreters of existentialism make the claim that for existentialists, anything and everything is

possible. In fact this is what seems to draw students to existentialism. To be an existentialist, they claim, is to recognize the existence of endless possibilities, all out there for the taking. This is clearly not the case, since to be an existentialist seems to require not only the courage to close off possibilities, but also the courage to define oneself in an irrevocable way. This leads us to the next feature of existential choice: the whole notion of *commitment*.

6. We have seen that for a choice to be existential, it cannot be frivolous. It closes off possibilities and sets boundaries that define one's identity. This being the case, an existential choice is always accompanied by the sense that future states of affairs are now *determined* by the choices one has made. If I choose to be a poet, then I have also chosen to determine the kind of life I am going to have in the future. It means that tomorrow, instead of reading medical books or tinkering with beakers and incense burners, I will have to instead figure out ways to write cunningly clever verses to drive home a peculiar feature of human experience that cannot be expressed except through poetry. In short, by choosing to be a poet, I am making a choice regarding the kind of person I will be not only for the present moment, but the kind of person I will be in the future as well. This implies a kind of continuity from the present to the future. To reiterate, choosing to be a poet is not to choose to be a poet only in the here and now. It is to *continue choosing to be a poet* in the future. This is not possible without an attending sense of commitment. When I choose to be a poet, then, present and future are linked in some irrevocable fashion through this commitment. I establish an identity and admit to myself that the decision to be a poet marks not just my present self, but my future self as well. Paradoxically, then, the more one makes existential choices, the less one becomes free—not in the sense that one no longer has free will, but in the sense that one has already started to define oneself in particular ways, ways that narrow the options available in the future. This is not to say that one can never change one's mind and start off on another project for oneself. It does mean, however, that when an existential choice is made, forks along the road that are not taken are forever left behind, and the road one takes defines a person in ways that are irrevocable and continues to define this person throughout the journey of a single life. This leads, finally, to the last feature of existential choice I shall discuss in this paper: *ownership and empowerment*.



7. Perhaps one of the most obvious features of existential choice is *ownership*. When one has made an existential choice, there is a sense in which the choice that is made is no one else's but one's own, even if others have been consulted in the process. This is part of the reason why human beings experience angst in the process of making an existential choice. As mentioned earlier, part of the reason why human beings experience angst is the recognition that the choices we make are fully our own, and so we cannot blame anyone else for the foolish choices we have made. There is more to angst than this, as we have seen, but ownership plays a big role in it nonetheless. This ownership of one's actions also leads to another feature of existential choice: that of *empowerment*. If the choices that I make are mine, and if some of those choices lead to the creation of a future self, then that gives me the power to create myself as I please. Of course as soon as I have made the decision to define myself in a particular way, this decision is in some sense irrevocable. Nonetheless, the decision is still owned by me and locates the power within myself. Existential choices, then, are choices that are accompanied by a strong sense of power. It is not the power that comes from overcoming a resistance, but the power that comes from the full recognition that the identity one has created for oneself has its source truly in oneself, and nowhere else.

## CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion on the essential structures of existential choice has shown that existential choices are rare. They have ways of defining us and limiting future choices because they close off possibilities that are excluded by the significant choices that we make. If this is the case, then being an existentialist, in its deepest sense, must be extremely difficult. There are those who claim that the existentialist standpoint is exciting (certainly more exciting than, say, being a stoic) primarily because it is a standpoint that assumes we can be anything we want to be, or that we can choose any option that is available to us. This view of existentialism, given the features we have described above, is at best misleading. In fact it would be wrong. If existential choices mark boundaries and require a commitment that stretches out into the future to a future self, then existentialism is as much about removing choices as it is about multiplying

them. As mentioned earlier, the more one chooses existentially, the less free one becomes—not because free will has been curtailed, but because possible futures are closed off by the committed choices we make.

## REFERENCES

- Dostoevsky, F. (1989). *Crime and punishment*. New York: Norton.
- Luper, S. (2000). *Existing: An introduction to existential thought*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1993). *Essays in existentialism*. New York: Kensington.
- Sartre, J.-P. (2001). *Being and nothingness: A phenomenological essay on ontology*. New York: Citadel Press.
- Styron, W. (1992). *Sophie's choice*. New York: Vintage.