

# Sartre on life choices philosophy essay



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In his writing, existentialism and human emotion, Sartre clearly states that man will be what he will have envisioned himself to be or planned to be. Existentiality leaves to man a possibility of choice. There are two kinds of existentiality but Sartre stands for the atheistic existentiality. This states that if God does not exist there is another being whose existence precedes essence. This means that man exists, but it is up to him to define himself later. The power to make himself lies solely on his choices. According to Sartre's argument, there is no human nature because there is no God to conceive it. Therefore man is defined all the choices he makes. This is the first principle of existentiality also known as subjectivity. In making this choice, he not only does it for himself but also all men. By choosing he affirms the value of his choice. He also says that man is condemned to be free as he is responsible for everything he does.

Often times in life we are faced with choices -simple or difficult. One type of choices is the incommensurable choices. These are choices that fulfill our desire or promote our values. Sartre says that while we are on a quest to define ourselves, all our choices are geared towards creating an image of the person we want to become. We always choose what is good. We make the assumption that what is good for us must be good for all. We can never choose evil. In one of his hypothesis, Sartre argues that if he were a working man and chose to join a Christian trade union instead of a communist, he would not be doing this because he believes in it but because whatever choice he makes must be for the good of all.

He goes further to give an example of a French student who is faced with a "tough choice." He is torn between joining the Free French Forces so that he

can avenge his brother's death in England and staying at home to help his mother carry on with her life. His mother solely relies on him as she is not in good terms with her husband and her other son is dead. He is fully aware of the consequences of his actions and the eventualities that may arise should he chose one action over the other. He can make a direct choice where he just considers himself and what he really wants or he can consider all the parties that are involved (his mother and the French forces) then make an informed choice. According to Kantian ethics, one should never treat a person as a means but an end. Whatever the student chooses, one of the parties involved will be treated as the means. If he should choose his mother the French forces will be a means and his mother the end. Should he choose the forces, the mother becomes a means to an end. Anyone in this situation would choose to "trust their instincts." This is a euphemism for the factors are too vague or broad. He will therefore choose whatever he feels more strongly about. Unfortunately there is no measure for the feeling and just like Sartre's student; we take the easy way out. We cannot determine what we are more inclined towards and yet we still make a choice and later justify it to ourselves.

If we were in the same situation, just as the student, we would argue that the weight of the feeling was determined prior to making the choice. The student says that in the end it is the feeling that matters and he ought to choose whichever pushes him more towards one direction. So he chooses to stay with his mother. He feels that his love for his mother is strong enough to sacrifice his desire for vengeance, adventure and action. This begs the question, how does he 'measure' the weight of those feeling?

Sartre disagrees with this point of view. His argument is that the two mental states have no weight to his previous choice. In other words, he has already made his choice and his quest to seek help is just to justify what he has already decided to do. According to Sartre's thesis this is a pre-determined weight meaning that even as he weighs his options, he has already made a choice. In incommensurable choices, we do not pick one option because we are certain our desire towards one variable is stronger than the desire towards the other alternative. In fact, once we choose one option our desire towards this option grows stronger; actually we create its weight through our actions. Sartre poses two important questions; " how is the value of the feeling determined?" and " what gives his feeling for his mother value?" he answers by saying that the only way to determine value or weight is to perform an act that defines it. By choosing to stay home and take care of his mother, he is giving this option more weight unconsciously and making the other option less important.

In simple terms, Sartre points out that one of the ways we make our decision is through deliberation; this involves carefully evaluating all the variables. The student is balancing the weight of his two options and opts for the one with ' more weight' so to speak. Sartre disagrees with this point of view as he writes, " How can I evaluate causes and motives on which I myself confer their value before all deliberation and by the very choice which I make of myself? The illusion here stems from the fact that we endeavor to take causes and motives for entirely transcendent things which I balance in my hands like weights and which possess a weight as a permanent property. Actually causes and motives have only the weight which my project confers

upon them.” He further rejects deliberation as a way of making choices because it does not give us an opportunity to make a free choice. As mentioned earlier we are condemned to be free and we must exercise this freedom whenever we have to make a choice.

We are all responsible for our choices and therefore we should take responsibility and exercise our freedom to choose. For instance, Sartre says that if the student decided to leave his mother and later felt remorse for his decision, he would find a reason to justify why he did not choose to stay with his mother while he had a chance. He will comfort himself by convincing himself that he was not a bad son; the desire to go to England was just greater than staying home at that moment. In his pre-determined weight analysis, Sartre argues that if we weigh of our motivational states against each other, then we shall not have exercised our freedom in making that choice.

Sartre also talks about his young Jesuit friend who faced a series of setbacks in his life. He lost his father at a young age and grew up in a place where he felt like a charity case and was in utter poverty. When he fails his military training, he joins the order. Instead of giving up and being bitter, he decides that his success lies in holiness rather than secular things in which he has failed all his life. It is the series of setbacks that finally push him to make an important choice. He does not have to weigh any options. He just makes a ‘free’ choice to join the order and as Sartre says freedom to choose is fundamental guide to how we respond to the options.

Having made our choices through deliberation, Sartre points out that later we may doubt our choices. We spend a lot of time deliberating on which way to go only to question it later. He says that the reasons for our doubt are regret, integrity and weakness of will. In his opening arguments, Sartre says that will is a conscious decision which is subsequent to what we have already made of ourselves. The student has himself as his mother's keeper and also wants to satisfy his love for action. If he chose to go to England, it is possible that he could have regrets later in life. He could feel like he did not make a choice following the highest values then.

Besides deliberation, we also rely on ethics and morals to make choices. As mentioned earlier the power to define man to what he wants to become lies on him. He does this by making choices for himself and also for the good of mankind. Man who perceives himself through the cogito also does the same for all the others. In order to define oneself, one must be connected to the others. This is known as inter-subjectivity where man decides what he is and what others are thus there is no instance where he makes 'personal decisions'. Objection dictates that one is able to do absolutely anything no matter the circumstances. Choice is always possible but it is impossible not to make a choice. Sartre gives an example where he says that if someone is capable of having a relationship, that person is obliged to choose an attitude and if he/she accepts responsibility for an individual decision, he must take responsibility for all mankind. For us however, Sartre argues that we are organized while making this choice. We either decide to remain chaste or marry without children or marry and have children. Whatever choice we make, we weigh the options not just for us but also for the other people that

may be involved. In other words we use morals and ethics to make this choice. In his work, Sartre likens ethics to art. According to him, in both art and ethics, there is creation and invention. We cannot create a priori for what is to be done. We cannot pass judgment on a painting that is yet to be created.

He gives an example of his student again who has followed all known ethics without anyone's guidance. In his ethical principle, he chooses to stay with his mother in France but preferring to make a sacrifice, he chooses to go to England. In following ethics he knows he has to choose one and abandon the other. As mentioned earlier it is impossible not to make a choice and it is also impossible to choose both. Sartre believes it is absurd to make an arbitrary choice because it is impossible to pass judgments on others and it does not promote progress or making oneself better. The nature of the situation may change but the choice remains a choice in any situation. Certain choices are however based on errors and others on truth. From his earlier argument, we are entitled to freedom of choice but does that freedom allow us to be dishonest? Honesty is a quest to promote this freedom. At the end of the day we all want freedom and our freedom depends on the freedom of others. Kant states that freedom desires both itself and the freedom of others. Sartre on the other hand argues that applying principles / ethics in making choices is too abstract. He says that the student in full consideration of ethics and principles would never in good conscience have left his mother. So according to Sartre we should overlook ethics sometimes because they hinder us from doing what we really want to do.

We should also consider whether through invention we have promoted freedom. Sartre gives an example of a girl who is in love with a man. The man happens to be engaged to somebody else. In considering ethics and human solidarity, she decides to let the man go for the sake of the other woman. Sartre compares her to another woman who would argue that true love deserves sacrifice. She would choose to hurt the other woman for her own happiness.

Sartre has made it quite clear that the way we make our life choices is misguided. He especially disagrees with deliberation as a way of making important life choices. As mentioned earlier, he says that when someone is trying to find a solution for any given situation, as they deliberate on which way to go, they have already made that choice. They seek for another opinion to affirm what they have already decided. On this, I am inclined to disagree with Sartre's view because for every choice we make, there are consequences therefore as much as we would like to exert our freedom of choice; we must weigh all the variables carefully. Like Sartre's student, our choices may seem straight forward but the reality is that we need to deliberate and ask for other people's opinions. I believe that by taking time to weigh those options is more prudent and we are exercising that freedom of choice that Sartre strongly advocates for. Sartre's friend the Jesuit did not have such a major decision to make; after all it is the number of setbacks he had that pushed him to opt to join the order. For most of the choices we have to make in our lives there will always be a form of a dilemma. And in my opinion, a dilemma calls for serious deliberations.



Sartre's argument is that if someone was to go to a priest to ask about an important choice, he already knows the kind of response he expects from the priest. The same way his student went to him; despite the fact that he already knew what to do. The best answer is "you are free to choose." I think his definition of freedom is somewhat misplaced. This is because even if the student was to deliberate and weigh his options, he will make a choice based on his findings. That to me is freedom. We always have to reckon with all probabilities the make an informed choice and as Sartre says; take responsibility for that choice.

I also disagree with Sartre's view that in order to make an informed choice we have to sometimes overlook ethics. These are the rules that guide us through our lives and if we trample all over them, then we degenerate to some sort of anarchy. Sartre says that if he discards God, then there has to be someone to invent values meaning he reckons values are important. He further says that to invent values means it is up to man to give life meaning and shape it as he wants it to be. He concurs that values are important yet argues that sometimes it is okay to overlook them so that we can be able to make a choice. I believe that values are a fundamental part of the deliberation system. Sartre disputes these two but I believe when we have moral values and we deliberate on an important choice, the process is greatly simplified and is more fulfilling as it is hard to look back with regret or doubt later in life.