

# **Applying the Concept of Choice in the Nigerian Education: the Existentialist's Perspective**

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## **Abstract**

This paper attempts to explicate the importance of choice in the business of education. Using philosophical method, the paper critically analyzes the concept of choice in the existentialist's philosophy with particular reference to some shortcomings of the school of thought. Apart from the limitations inherent in the existential concept of choice, it is the writer's position that a system of education based on the existentialist concept of choice will make the learners realize that choice makes them the creator of their own world; bring in the learner the need for prior deliberation so as to make meaningful decisions; encourage the spirit of self-reliance; recognize the worth and dignity of the learners; enable the learners apply critical thinking rather than bow before the pronouncement of an authority amongst others.

**Keywords:** Applying, Concept, Choice, Existentialist Perspective

## **Introduction**

Choice occupies the centre stage of the existentialists' philosophy. Choice is an important concept in any ethical system. Man makes choice. It is man who decides what to value and attaches meaning to things through the choices he makes. Without man, nothing can be valued. He is the source of values. No value can impose itself on human freedom since it is human freedom that makes values exist simply by choosing it as a value; and choice is the concrete actualization of freedom. Therefore, to be free is to be compelled to make a choice.

The concept of choice cannot be played down in the business of education. It implies instilling the habits of respect for the worth and dignity of the individual as a thinking being and capable of making rational decisions. Enoh (1995) has stated that "the emphasis on self realization in our National Philosophy of Education is recognition of the worth of every individual. Moreso, choice in the Nigerian education will afford the individuals the opportunity to choose between the various subjects/courses available to be offered in order to meet their interests.

Of importance is the fact that choice provides the opportunity for the individuals to make career options at very early stages of their educational stage. The concept will undermine the undue influence wielded by parents in career choices. In the words of Peters (1966, p. 196):

*In the search for reasons for action is the hall-mark of autonomous person. He is not prepared to accept authoritative pronouncements and is unhappy about simply doing what others do without inquiring any further. He will thus be very concerned that people should be educated in a way which encourages independence of mind.*

The point of emphasis is that students are in one way or the other been frustrated because their own destiny was created by parents and/or teachers who take major decisions for them. Consequently, these students are made to face the difficulties they did not create. They end up suffering the bad fate alone. This is to say that, often times, individuals (students, our emphasis) suffer the consequences of what they are not responsible for. That is the choice they did not make. It is with this realization that this paper attempts a philosophical analysis of the existentialists' concept of choice, its limitations and implications to Nigerian education so as to discover the importance of choice in education and to see how a system of education based on the existential concept of choice will help the learners make a responsible choice and be ready to bear the consequences of their choice.

### **The Existentialist's Concept of Choice**

Existentialism is a contemporary philosophical movement which arose as a protest against the traditional emphasis in Philosophy. Soren Kierkegard (1813-1955) was the first to utilize the term "existential". Other philosophers that expanded this movement were Jean Paul Satre (1905-1980), Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Goobriel Marcel (1889-1973), Maurice Merleau – Ponty (1908-1961) and Albert Camus (1913-1960).

Existentialism is a revolt against any kind of determinism and affirmation of the free nature of man. Man is fundamentally free to create his essence. Man is not only free but ironically he is condemned to be free. He discovered himself, his existence came first and he is now in the process of determining his essence. In the words of Okoh (2003, p. 44), "the existentialists ask questions like: who am I? Does my life have meaning? What is my destiny? How do I confront choice?"

Man is the focal point of existentialism rather than reality. To them, to exist is to be personally involved in the drama of life as an actor rather than as a passive spectator. To exist means to be personally committed to a freely chosen way of life; it means being conscious of the problems of human life with all the choices open to man and freely opting for a certain way of life while assuming full personal responsibility for it (Omoregbe, 1991, p. 38). To exist, therefore, is to be at the helm of one's affairs, personally directing its main course. It means really living one's own life the way one has freely chosen and assuming responsibility for it. So, the main concern

of the existentialist is limited to the actual problems of man (poverty, sickness, anguish, hunger, etc.) in his existence. Quoting Setharamu (2008, p. 830) "what occasions' philosophical enquiry is not mere intellectual curiosity but a crisis in the individual's life, which calls upon him to make a choice 'regarding his subsequent existence".

The first principle of existentialism is that, 'man's existence precedes essence'. That is, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene and, only afterwards, defines himself. If man is to be defined, it is only afterwards when he himself would have made what he will be. He is nothing than what he makes himself through the choice he has made. He creates values; he makes his choice on which he will be and suffers the consequences alone.

One significant difference in the existentialist concept of choice is the frequency with which it is exercised. Their concept of choice is not limited to special situations which are not the everyday affair. To them, choice is what we make in every moment of our life. In Sartrean terms, since God does not exist to pre-arrange man's feature and his values, man is condemned to the agony and anguish of choosing, and every moment that he lives, he creates not only his own values but also the values of others (Akinpelu, 2005, p. 81). Choice is the inevitability of man as long as he lives; choice is ubiquitous.

Furthermore, to choose is to commit the chooser. That is, every choice that is made involves personal commitment of the chooser. The chooser is liable to the full responsibility for all he has freely chosen. The implication of choosing is that one has to choose what one will become. But perhaps more agonizing is the responsibility aspect of choices that one makes. If the existentialists credit man with unlimited freedom to choose, they, at the same time, place squarely on the shoulder of the chooser, the responsibility for any consequences that may come out of the choice he has made.

According to Akinpelu (2005, p. 82), citing Sartre defines responsibility as:

conscious acceptance of being the incontestable author of an event or of an object". It is the logical requirement of the consequents of man's freedom. Since according to Sartre, there is no God on whom one can blame the consequences, since we have no excuse because we create ourselves, we bear responsibility for all that happens, whether through our conscious will, or through our facticity or any other accident.

In fact, as Sartre says, "there are no accidents in life", for there is no situation in life in which one cannot choose otherwise.

Since man lives the life he has chosen for himself, it then means that the quality of life man lives depends on the quality of choice he makes. This may serve as warning to any person who might wish to interpret the 'freedom to choose' as a license to go beyond his frontier. So, the much emphasis on responsibility clearly indicates the need for thorough pre-choice reflection in

order that the choice one makes will not be parochial, but objective, reasonable and meaningful.

### **Limitations of the Existentialist Concept of Choice**

Existentialism has always been attacked for advocating individualism. Some existentialists (such as Kierkegaard and Sartre) constantly stress individuality in their philosophy to the extent of exaggeration. This level of autonomy advocacy could lead to indiscipline, non-conformity to the norms of the society, and lack of respect to authority.

Existentialism to an extent, contradicts itself. We can see this contradiction between the individual nature and the social nature of man. In the first place, the existentialists stress the social nature of man, whom they say, is a 'being-with-others'. But on the other hand, they stress man's singularity, individuality and uniqueness.

Furthermore, the existentialist concept of freedom of choice is not synonymous with the ability to achieve one's aim. It does not say anything about the individual's ability to achieve a target choice freely made. That is why Omoregbe (1991, p. 45) citing Sartre asserts that:

*It is necessary to point out to common sense says Sartre, that the formula 'to be free' does not mean 'to obtain what one has wished, but rather by oneself to determine oneself' wish (in the sense of choosing). In other words, success is not important to freedom.*

Existentialism ignores the formidable influence of the environment and religious life. It ignores factors such as social class, race, tribe, age, sex and religion and stresses that choices determine in totality, what one becomes in life. Thus, existentialism rejects that man's essence to a certain extent, determined.

However, despite the shortcomings in the existentialist philosophy, it is important that man must choose individual freedom in order to direct his existence and be saved from complete Nihilism. The educational interest in Existential Phenomenology, according to Strain (1971, p. 473) "is the individual person, a living of feelings and emotions who must come face to face with himself and others".

### **Implications to the Nigerian Education**

The purpose of analysis is to improve practice, not simply to satisfy intellectual curiosity. All that has been said so far is an abstract theory, and what is important is its practical application to the Nigerian situation. Thus, attempts are made to prescribe some measures to achieve the goals of common satisfaction of interests, social harmony and peace which the Nigerian society tries to achieve in the business of education.

First of all, a system of education that is based on the existentialist concept of choice will lead to the recognition of the worth and dignity of the learners. The school of thought recognizes the fact that every individual is a thinking being and as a result, is capable of making his/her own rational judgment without being dominated by the crowd or what is referred to as the 'majority'.

The concept of choice in education can develop in the learners, the rebellious habit when necessary to do so, to maintain the authenticity and integrity. Learners will be at liberty to apply critical thinking rather than bow before the pronouncement of an authority which if properly analyzed, might be counterproductive.

Since choices are tied to responsibilities and consequences, the philosophy of existentialism therefore emphasizes the need for prior deliberation so as to make meaningful choices.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Choice in existentialism encourages the spirit of self-reliance. It encourages the learners to be less dependent on both his teachers, parents or colleague because such dependence does not encourage him to face his problems in his later life in the absence of these individuals.

The existentialist concept of choice will make the learners realize that the choice they make in life is the arbiters of their own destiny. Choice makes them the creators of their own world.

Choice in the existentialist philosophy will teach the Nigerian students on how to 'care' and how to be 'involved'. This positive attitude will influence the learners' behavior while in school, and also, dictates the way they live even after their school lives.

Finally, the agony and anguish of accepting full responsibility for the learner's failure is emphasized in existentialism. Exposing the learners to the existential concept of choice will inevitably develop in them, a conscious awareness and sensitivity to events around them.

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