

Freedom and the Burden of Choice in Sartre's Concept of Existence

Research Review Journal of
Interdisciplinary Studies

double-blind peer-reviewed and
refereed online quarterly Journal

ISSN (online): 3108-0472

1(3) 117-124, 2025

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 10.31305/rrjis.2025.v1.n3.016

 <https://rrjournals.in/>



Received: 13 Sep, 2025

Revised: 19 Nov, 2025

Accepted: 22 Nov, 2025

Published: 31 Dec, 2025

*Sahena Sultana Mondal

Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, Seacom Skills University

Abstract: *The complex dynamics of freedom and choice in Jean Paul Sartre's existential philosophy are examined in this paper, with a focus on how radical freedom and the responsibility that goes along with it characterize human existence. Humans are self-creating agents whose identities, values, and purposes are not predetermined but must be continuously formed via conscious decision-making, according to Sartre's fundamental thesis that existence precedes essence. The study explores the conflict between sincerity and dishonesty, showing how people might avoid accountability by restricting their freedom, which undermines the purpose of their lives. The interpersonal aspect of choice is also explored, showing that freedom is never used in a vacuum and always has social and ethical ramifications because our decisions subtly reflect what we think mankind should be. The essay also explores the creative aspect of freedom, showing how people create meaning, design their lives, and alter their experiences in a world without intrinsic meaning. This study emphasizes the dual nature of freedom as both empowering and anxiety-inducing, positioning it as the cornerstone of ethical responsibility, personal authenticity, and meaning-making by synthesizing primary texts, such as Being and Nothingness and Existentialism Is a Humanism, with modern scholarly interpretations. In the end, Sartre's existentialism presents a profound picture in which the human situation is both emancipated and burdened, forcing people to face the obligations of authorship in their own lives.*

Keywords: *Sartre, existentialism, freedom, responsibility, authenticity, bad faith, meaning-making, interpersonal choice, human existence.*

1 | INTRODUCTION

One of the most difficult aspects of human existence is addressed by Jean Paul Sartre's existential philosophy: the paradox of complete freedom intertwined with the burden of choice. The radical

*Corresponding Author

 Sahena Sultana Mondal, Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, Seacom Skills University

 sahena.sm@gmail.com

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assertion that existence comes before essence, which holds that people do not have a predetermined nature but must instead define who they are through specific choices and deeds, lies at the core of Sartre's philosophy (Sartre, 1946/2007, p. 20). This ontological assertion suggests that freedom is a necessary condition of being human rather than a contingent quality. However, freedom is not a neutral gift; rather, it is a heavy load that carries both possibilities and responsibility. This existential weight is aptly captured by Sartre's famous statement, "Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does" (Sartre, 1946/2007). As I interact with Sartre's concept of existence, I discover that freedom and responsibility are inextricably linked: we are freedom, not only possess it, yet we are unable to escape its burden. This implies that every decision we make influences both our own development and a more comprehensive model of human values. According to Sartre, every decision upholds a specific ideal of humanity, imposing an obligation on the decision-maker that goes beyond the self (Sartre, 1946/2007).

Scholars who doubt whether such radical freedom is psychologically, socially, or ethically sustainable have examined and criticized the philosophical severity of this assertion. Sartre creates an ontology of human consciousness (*pour soi*) in Being and Nothingness that is always "transcending" given circumstances, which he refers to as facticity—the actual circumstance we had no control over but nonetheless had to deal with. He contends that people are always free to transcend their present circumstances since consciousness is defined by emptiness, or the capacity to deny what it is (Sartre, 1943/1956). This compelling explanation shows how human freedom is essential to our existence rather than incidental, but it also generates a constant conflict between freedom and facticity that each agent must resolve. Sartre's idea is expanded upon by modern analyses that look at the social and psychological ramifications of such freedom. For instance, the authenticity versus bad faith dichotomy is emphasized in recent scholarly work as being essential to comprehending the burden of choice. By blaming their behaviour on outside factors, social roles, or deterministic causes, people who behave in poor faith try to deny their freedom and avoid taking full responsibility (Akinbode, 2023, pp. 15-18). Such avoidance, according to Sartre's existentialism, is not only intellectual evasion but rather a deeper inability to face the fundamental requirement of human freedom.

The phenomenological weight of this freedom is frequently accompanied by agony—not just psychological concern, but an awareness of one's universal responsibility in every decision made. According to Sartre (1946/2007), people are accountable not just for themselves but also for setting an example for the rest of humanity. What distinguishes Sartre's existentialism from more essentialist or deterministic theories is its ethical implication. It places freedom as both a significant opportunity and a moral obligation, making human conduct both innovative and significant.

Although Sartre's theory supports human autonomy, it has also drawn criticism from those who contend that unrestricted freedom could jeopardize common moral principles. Critics wonder if Sartre's rejection of preexisting ideals leaves morality unanchored, making any decision feasible but not necessarily desirable in any objective sense. However, in Sartre's existential perspective, the burden of choice is the essential condition that characterizes human existence rather than a flaw that needs to be fixed. In this paper, I will examine how Sartre's theory of freedom shows how human existence is a dynamic interaction between the freeing openness of choice and the intimidating responsibility that goes along with it. I hope to shed light on how freedom, in all its burdens, is essential to comprehending what it is to be human by analysing both the ontological underpinnings and ethical aspects of Sartre's philosophy.

2 | FREEDOM AS THE CORE OF HUMAN EXISTENCE:

According to Sartre's existential theory, freedom is the essential condition that underpins human existence rather than just a characteristic that people have. By asserting that "existence precedes essence," which means that humans are not born with a predetermined purpose or character but must

constantly affirm themselves via actual choices, Sartre decisively deviates from conventional metaphysical presumptions (Sartre, as stated in SparkNotes, para. 1). According to Sartre, freedom is the fundamental essence of what it means to be human, not an extra attribute (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Section 4.1). According to this concept, each decision we make is both a tangible manifestation of our freedom and a confirmation that we identify ourselves only by our decisions, independent of any predetermined pattern.

This radical viewpoint is encapsulated in Sartre's well-known statement, "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, p. 28). Therefore, human freedom cannot be contingent, incidental, or partial; rather, it is the fundamental structure of human cognition. According to him, we are "condemned to be free" since no outside force, whether supernatural, deterministic, or logical, can absolve us of the need to make our own decisions. According to Sartre, consciousness is constantly involved in nihilation, a self-negating activity that allows for choice because consciousness is constantly changing rather than being fixed or predetermined (*Being and Nothingness*, as summarized in Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, para. 4).

This ontological centrality is emphasized by existential freedom research. According to Akinbode's (2023) peer-reviewed analysis, Sartre views human freedom as both a factual fact and a prerequisite for genuine human life. According to Akinbode, this complete freedom implies that people are in charge of determining their own meaning and purpose rather than being dictated by outside forces or preexisting essences (p. 16). In Sartre's philosophy, freedom is therefore the foundation of moral agency and authenticity rather than just a philosophical concept. The ontological primacy of freedom also produces what Sartre refers to as facticity and transcendence: although humans are always situated in a concrete world with specific limitations, they simultaneously project themselves beyond these conditions through reflective choice (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Section 4.1). It is clear from this dialectic between one's thrownness and one's projects that Sartrean freedom is neither helpless determinism nor unrestricted escape. Rather, freedom is at the core of daily decisions, both profound and ordinary, that help people determine their identities and the significance of their lives. In his analysis of Sartre's writings, Landau (2012) clarifies that freedom is not just the ability to act but also the process by which we give our circumstances context and identify our core life goals.

However, the ontological centrality of freedom invariably entails ethical weight. According to Sartre, we should always make decisions not just for ourselves but also in a way that subtly reflects what we think a human being should be. This tying of freedom to responsibility heightens both its existential burden and its creative promise. According to the academic Akinbode (2023), Sartre believed that freedom and responsibility were inextricably linked: making decisions without considering divine or objective moral systems is making decisions for all of humanity because each decision subtly supports a vision of what people can and should become (p. 17). According to Sartre's theory, freedom is therefore the fundamental aspect of human existence rather than an abstract political ideal or a philosophical quality. It establishes our identity, serves as the foundation for our moral obligation, and acts as the unchanging standard by which all decisions must be judged. This radical rethinking of freedom pushes us to view it as a constant state of being in the world, one that is fundamental, unavoidable, and constantly requiring us to make our own decisions.

3 | THE BURDEN OF CHOICE: ANGUISH AND RESPONSIBILITY

According to Sartre's existential philosophy, freedom and choice are existential states that have a great deal of weight rather than just being abstract abilities. For Sartre, freedom is a source of agony since it involves whole responsibility rather than a comforting declaration of autonomy. This paradox is encapsulated in the phrase "man is condemned to be free" (Sartre, as cited in Zuraikat & Mashreqi, 2025, p. 119). Freedom, far from relieving human constraint, exposes people to the full weight of their

decisions, leaving them accountable not only for what they do but also for who they become. According to my interpretation of Sartre, the agony that comes with freedom is the ontological result of comprehending that every decision is inextricably linked to one's mission of self-creation rather than a pathological concern.

In his lecture *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Sartre makes a clear connection between freedom and responsibility. He states that "existentialists like to say that man is in anguish" and explains that this anguish results from realizing that one's decisions are universal predicates rather than isolated acts (Sartre, 1946/2007, p. 25). According to Sartre, when we make decisions for ourselves, we are implicitly making decisions for all of mankind because we set an example for what we believe humanity should be. This universal aspect of decision-making increases the burden on the individual: one is indirectly endorsing a vision of human possibility rather than just selecting a path for oneself. The subject is forced to confront the implications of freedom when they realize that there is no outside authority—no divine rule or unchangeable moral code—to take accountability for their decisions (Sartre, 1946/2007, pp. 24–26).

According to Sartre, anguish is the state of action itself rather than an interior neurosis or malaise. According to Sartre (1946/2007, p. 27), it arises "not because of doubt as to what choice to make, but because one sees that all choices refer back to oneself and one's responsibility." In this sense, agony is a basic existential experience that emerges whenever a person acknowledges the lack of predetermined values and understands that it is up to them to define their life and commitments. This viewpoint fundamentally alters our understanding of moral responsibility: the individual bears the responsibility for the meaning of their decisions in a way that is both profoundly personal and inevitably universal, rather than being constrained by external standards.

This ontological load is supported by academic literature. According to Zuraikat and Mashreqi (2025), Sartre's existentialism links freedom to what they refer to as "anguishing responsibility," stressing that suffering results from "realizing that individuals are forced to act upon their notion of free will and that avoidance of decision remains itself a choice" (p. 119). Sartre frequently underlines that even inaction has responsibility: "choice is possible; what is impossible is not to choose" (as reported in Zuraikat & Mashreqi, 2025, p. 119). Because it throws the entire burden of one's life orientation on oneself, without the use of justifications or outside influences, such responsibility exacerbates agony. Sartre's idea of bad faith, in which people try to avoid accountability by acting as though their freedom is constrained by circumstances, roles, or deterministic narratives, also overlaps with the existential burden of choice. Secondary literature claims that bad faith is an attempt to adopt illusions that lessen personal responsibility in order to deny the agony of freedom. According to the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (2015), bad faith is essentially a defence against the responsibility that freedom imposes, a failure to face the reality that one's actions always reflect personal decisions that shape not only my life but also the model of humanity I tacitly embrace. The core of Sartre's existentialism is the unavoidable combination of freedom with suffering and accountability. It challenges reassuring notions of a predetermined or predictable life by arguing that each decision is a step toward a horizon of possibilities that represents one's ethos and beliefs. Anguish turns into the cost of freedom, exposing the extent of our responsibility and forcing us to face the moral ramifications of our actions. In this way, the burden of freedom is not an unwanted burden that should be avoided, but rather a fact of life in a world where we are the creators of our own ideals and destiny.

Authenticity vs. Bad Faith:

The conflict between sincerity and dishonesty in Sartre's existential philosophy highlights the complex processes that both embrace and deny human freedom. According to Sartre, humans are incredibly free—a freedom that allows for genuine self-creation—but this freedom can be circumvented by

ignorance or self-deception. According to Sartre, authenticity is a way of life in which a person accepts their autonomy and accountability as the cornerstones of their identity rather than a set psychological state. On the other hand, the phenomena known as “bad faith” (*mauvaise foi*) occurs when we refuse this freedom and fabricate information to avoid having to make a decision. According to Sartre, bad faith is a purposeful, albeit frequently concealed, denial of one’s own agency rather than a mistake (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2025). In *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 1943/1956, as cited in *Being and Nothingness Important Quotes*, p. 90), Sartre most clearly introduces bad faith. He uses vivid examples, such as “the waiter who is ‘playing at’ being a waiter,” acting as if his role fully determines his existence, thereby reducing himself to an object and denying his own transcendence. Sartre’s argument here is that in order to be authentic, one must acknowledge both their facticity—the specifics of their circumstances—and their transcendence—the continuous process of self-formation. Falsifying this dual structure by treating oneself as if one’s identity were permanent and unchangeable gives rise to bad faith. In this sense, ill faith is a self-deception that actively suppresses one’s freedom rather than just being an error about oneself.

Because ill faith poses as certainty, it is especially pernicious. According to Sartre, one “pretends that his freedom is not there, that it is impossible” when acting dishonestly (Sartre, 1943/1956, as discussed in the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy). In these situations, people try to escape their transcendence by fully identifying with their facticity, as though their positions, social expectations, or prior decisions could control who they are. This denial of freedom is contradictory because the decision to deny freedom is a decision taken by freedom. Put differently, poor faith is an abuse of freedom rather than a lack of it. According to Sartre, authenticity entails taking complete responsibility and freedom. Realizing that one’s decisions are based on their own endeavours and commitments rather than being dictated by labels or roles from the outside world is an ongoing process. In existentialist, authenticity necessitates “deliberately choosing one’s moral commitments and actions in order to transform oneself into a coherent moral subject,” fully conscious of how these choices reflect one’s freedom, according to one interpretive interpretation (LitCharts, n.d.). True authenticity unites facticity with the consciousness of freedom rather than erasing it.

The academic literature emphasizes that Sartre’s thoughts on authenticity cannot be reduced to a static “true self” that predates decision-making. This issue is highlighted by David Weberman’s work in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* and subsequent works, where Sartre avoids proposing a predetermined self that choices only express. Rather than relying on an external essence, authenticity arises via continuous interaction with one’s facticity and freedom. Weberman contends that authenticity emerges in the act of exercising freedom and does not require a fixed “true self” to underpin authentic decision (Weberman, 2011). According to Sartre, authenticity and bad faith are therefore two diametrically opposed reactions to the human situation of freedom. In order to avoid the uneasiness of freedom, bad faith finds solace in rigid identities, conventions, or roles. By recognizing that we are “what we make of ourselves” and that our beliefs and commitments are the results of freely selected projects, authenticity directly addresses that fear. Authentic life continues to be the ideal that existential freedom constantly aspires to, notwithstanding Sartre’s suggestion that one never completely escapes bad faith because the conflict between facticity and transcendence always persists. In this way, authenticity is a continuous negotiation rather than a destination—a contemplative affirmation of freedom that consistently rejects the alluring comforts of self-deception and dishonesty.

4 | THE INTERPERSONAL DIMENSION OF CHOICE:

According to Sartre’s existential ontology, freedom is inextricably linked to the world of others, and the interpersonal aspect of choice shows how human freedom and responsibility are constantly situated within a space of intersubjective interactions rather than being isolated entities. The idea of being for others (*l’état pour-autrui*) is developed in Sartre’s early existential work *Being and Nothingness* to

demonstrate how interactions with other conscious beings fundamentally influence human freedom. In this way, I believe that choice in Sartre's philosophy cannot be understood as an independent act of free will; rather, it is precisely because it is always already entwined with others that it gains its full complexity. According to Sartre, our life is focused on both the world and other subjects, making the Other's existence a necessary component of our own freedom. Because of this relational framework, my decisions are implicitly accountable to both myself and the people I implicitly involve in the meaning of my acts (Sartre, 1943/1956, Part Three). The idea of "the Look" (*le regard*), a situation in which another person's gaze transforms me into an object for them, undermining my feeling of personal autonomy and making me face the reality of being seen, is fundamental to Sartre's interpersonal analysis. Sartre famously addresses this in *Being and Nothingness*, noting that by treating me like a fixed object, the Other's gaze can distance me from my own self-directed consciousness. This experience makes it clear that my freedom is not entirely private; rather, it takes place in an environment where others have the ability to make me objective, which makes my quest for self-definition more difficult. The encounter with the Other emphasizes that my decisions are always made in connection to intersubjective recognition, an interpersonal component that intensifies the ethical and existential weight of freedom, even though Sartre uses this to depict conflict and objectification.

Sartre's later *Existentialism Is a Humanism* explains how this interpersonal dimension functions in more commonplace moral decisions: making a decision for oneself invariably entails making an implicit decision about how others should be treated. According to Sartre, when I make a decision, I implicitly support a human behaviour model that I believe others could adhere to; this gives personal freedom universal importance. According to Sartre, "in choosing for myself I choose man," which implies that my decision has an impact on other people since it presents a universal definition of what it means to be human (Sartre, 1946/2007).

Sartre's interpersonal dimension of choice is not only an abstract thesis but also profoundly influences how identity, freedom, and responsibility are negotiated in actual human encounters, according to modern study on intersubjectivity, which builds on these basic writings. Because "I cannot define myself as 'spiritual' or 'jealous' unless others recognize me as such," LitCharts' examination of intersubjectivity in *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, for instance, emphasizes Sartre's assertion that others are crucial to our understanding of ourselves (LitCharts, n.d., p. 41). This demonstrates that the interpersonal space is a component of the identities we choose via behaviour rather than existing outside of freedom.

Furthermore, the interpersonal dimension of choice is described as a prerequisite for significant ethical participation in recent work on Sartre's social ontology. Later studies see Sartre's existential intersubjectivity as more nuanced, despite the fact that his early formulations primarily emphasize conflict, as exemplified by the well-known line "Hell is other people" from his play *No Exit*. According to Sartre (see study of Sartre's relational ontology), freedom and recognition in real connections happen dialectically: others can both threaten my autonomy and enable the social meaning of decisions that confirm reciprocal freedom rather than objectification alone. Therefore, the interpersonal dimension of choice in Sartre's existential framework demonstrates that individual freedom is never exercised in isolation from the other people who live in our world. Every decision I make has an impact on a web of interpersonal relationships, involving other people in a common area of significance, accountability, and acknowledgment. Sartre's observation compels us to reevaluate freedom as a relational truth, where the presence, gaze, and recognition of others fundamentally shape the possibilities and burdens of decision, rather than as a totally private state. By showing that genuinely human freedom is constantly co-constituted and answerable to the social reality we live in, this broadens our concept of existential freedom.

5 | FREEDOM, CREATIVITY, AND MEANING-MAKING:

According to Sartre's existential theory, freedom is the basis of human creativity and meaning-making, not just the ability to make decisions. According to Sartre, humans do not inherit meaning or purpose from a preexisting essence or divine plan; rather, we create meaning via our voluntary endeavours and interactions with the world—a creative work that is ongoing, dynamic, and intrinsically burdened with responsibility. This crucial point is emphasized by Sartre's famous assertion that "existence precedes essence": people first exist and then define themselves through the decisions they make, the values they create, and the meanings they create in their lives (Akinbode, 2023, pp. 15–18). Sartre's phenomenological ontology in *Being and Nothingness*, which implies that human consciousness is focused on possibility rather than fixed reality, informs his conception of freedom as the catalyst for creation. According to Sartre, consciousness is fundamentally projective since it is constantly "being toward something," which implies that people constantly go beyond their current circumstances in search of objectives, ideals, or novel possibilities. This ongoing rejection of the present is a creative act in and of itself, a continuous process of choosing to remake oneself and the world. Sartre views freedom as an active creative power that allows us to transform ourselves as agents and give the world new meaning, rather than merely characterizing it as the capacity to choose between options (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2022).

Sartre's rejection of any preset human essence is closely related to this creative aspect of freedom. We cannot learn about ourselves alone via introspection or derive meanings from custom or divine rule in a universe where essence does not exist before existence. Rather, every choice we make shapes who we are, from small actions to big decisions. We actively create meaning rather than being passive consumers of it. As a result, human life turns into a creative endeavour in which we constantly create, modify, and live new identities, values, and purposes solely by our own deeds and commitments. This is best expressed by Sartre's famous claim that humans are "condemned to be free" since creating one's own life story is an unavoidable creative burden. This existential creative reading of Sartre is supported by current study. Akinbode (2023), in his analysis of Sartre's existential freedom, emphasizes that Sartre's claim that humans are free to create their own meaning and purpose in life is central to understanding how freedom and responsibility cohere in his philosophy (pp. 15–18). According to this perspective, freedom is not an abstract concept but rather a creative ability that allows people to write the meaning of their lives in the context of a meaningless or apathetic universe. Human life is both creative and contingent because, according to Sartre, meaning arises from involvement across time rather than preexisting in some cosmic plan; our initiatives constantly modify our sense of what counts.

We get analogous affirmations when we place Sartre's concept within more general existential discussions of meaning. According to Zuraikat et al. (2025), freedom and responsibility are not only fundamental to Sartre's ontology but also essential to the hopeful potential of existentialism: although radical freedom exposes people to suffering, it also makes it possible to create personal meaning and value in a world that lacks intrinsic purpose. This emphasizes that creating meaning is essentially a creative and powerful endeavour rather than an arbitrary responsibility, even though it might cause worry. Therefore, Sartre's philosophy pushes us to rethink freedom as the creative essence of human existence: we create values, mold our identities, and weave the fabric of social and personal significance that make up our meaningful lives through our freely chosen undertakings. The creative freedom Sartre talks about is a lifetime activity, an ongoing act of self-production and world-making that is fundamental to what it means to be human in an existential cosmos without a predefined goal. In this way, the burden of choice becomes the great duty each of us has in writing our own lives, and freedom is not only a condition of choice but the creative engine of meaning itself.

6 | CONCLUSION:

It is clear from studying Sartre's existential philosophy that although freedom is fundamental to human life, it is inextricably linked to the weight of responsibility and decision-making. Sartre forces us to acknowledge that humans are not born with a predetermined nature or purpose; rather, we must constantly define ourselves by conscious choices through the framework of existence preceding essence. Even though this radical freedom is empowering, it always leads to suffering because every decision we make affects not only the ego but also the implicit humanity that our acts represent. The existential dilemma is highlighted by the conflict between authenticity and bad faith: to live truly is to completely embrace one's freedom and face the weight of duty instead of giving in to self-deception or social conformity. Furthermore, Sartre's idea of intersubjectivity shows that freedom is never used in a vacuum; our decisions have social and ethical ramifications, making meaning-creation a deeply relational and creative process. In the end, the interaction of freedom, creativity, and responsibility emphasizes how human existence has the capacity to alter. Acknowledging the weight that comes with freedom gives us the ability to actively create our lives and give them significance, both individually and collectively, as well as a greater awareness of our existential state. Therefore, Sartre's philosophy offers an empowering but demanding vision in which each human carries the responsibility and privilege of authoring their own existence rather than providing comfort in determinism or transcendental purpose.

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Cite this article

Mondal, S. S. (2025). Freedom and the Burden of Choice in Sartre's Concept of Existence. *Research Review Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 1(3), 117-124. <https://doi.org/10.31305/rrjis.2025.v1.n3.016>