

Categories of Existential Philosophy in HOA HAO Buddhism in Vietnam

Khoa Ngoc Vo Nguyen

Ph.D, University of Finance – Marketing, Vietnam

Received 10-09-2024

Revised 11-09-2024

Accepted 18-10-2024

Published 20-10-2024



Copyright: ©2024 The Authors. Published by Publisher. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Abstract:

Hoa Hao Buddhism is an indigenous religion of Vietnam that emerged in the early 20th century. Existentialism is a school of European philosophy that originated in the late 19th century and reached its peak in the early 20th century. Although these two distinct theoretical systems arose in different regions, they share a common theme: the human condition and the quest for liberation from that condition. Both developed in similar contexts, where the human being was thrown into alien and objective circumstances, facing the tragedy of the era to which they belonged. As a result, humans are burdened with the responsibility of seeking meaning for their own existence.

This paper focuses on analyzing the common categories employed by existential philosophy, as reflected in the teachings of Hoa Hao Buddhism, in order to uncover the similarities in their approaches to human existence. On a theoretical level, this further affirms the correctness of the Marxist-Leninist principle that "social existence determines social consciousness."

Keyword: Existential philosophy, Existentialism, Hoa Hao Buddhism, Philosophy of humanity, Vietnam.

1. Overview of Hoa Hao Buddhism:

1.1. The Formation of Hoa Hao Buddhism:

According to various historical sources, Hoa Hao Buddhism (which originated from the Hoa Hao religion) was officially founded by a young man named Huynh Phu So in 1939. The first temple, An Hoa Tu, is located in Hoa Hao village, Tan Chau district, Chau Doc province, which is now Phu My town, Phu Tan district, An Giang province.

Hoa Hao Buddhism emerged during a historical period in Vietnam before World War II (1939-1945). At this time, the colonial exploitation policies of the French created significant social tensions in Vietnam. In Southern Vietnam, the economic divide between landlords and peasants

deepened. According to author Bui Thi Thu Ha, landowners constituted only 4.3% of the population in Long Xuyen and 0.6% in Chau Doc but owned more than 50% of the cultivated land. Notably, landlord Nam Giao in Nhon Hung village, adjacent to Hoa Hao village where Hoa Hao Buddhism originated, implemented harsh land policies against laborers. In this context, the people found no escape from their lives, lacking a sense of self, and turned to Buddha and Heaven for protection and guidance. This reflects the psychological and social roots of the emergence of religions in Southern Vietnam in general and Hoa Hao Buddhism in particular (Bui Thi Thu Ha, 2012).

Huynh Phu So, born on November 25, 1920, to Mr. Huynh Cong Bo, was educated in a French-Vietnamese primary school in Phu Tan. According to tradition, Huynh Phu So displayed intelligence and a talent for poetry from a young age but could not continue his studies due to chronic health issues. Upon reaching adulthood, he sought treatment in the Nui Cam region, where he encountered the Buu Son Ky Huong religion and began studying and practicing.

Huynh Phu So claimed to have been granted a divine lifespan alongside Buddha Amitabha and the historical Buddha Shakyamuni to propagate the teachings of Buu Son Ky Huong to the people. His goal was to "revive Buddhism, save sentient beings from the river of delusion and the sea of suffering, and lead followers to the Western Paradise."

During his spiritual mission, Huynh Phu So attracted followers through his miraculous healing abilities. Gaining the trust of the majority, he combined the transmission of teachings with prophetic verses he personally composed. His effective healing and fluent literary ability, despite his limited education, further solidified the people's trust in him. As a result, from 1937 to 1939, he attracted many followers, becoming famous throughout the region.

On July 4, 1939, corresponding to the 18th day of the fifth month in the Year of the Goat, Huynh Phu So officially established the religion. The founding ceremony took place at his family home. He named his new religion "Hoa Hao," which was later changed to "Hoa Hao Buddhism," based on the name of the village where he was born. From this point on, he was revered by his followers as the religious leader, referred to as Duc Huynh Giao Chu.

Throughout his spiritual journey, he composed numerous poems, later compiled into the book *Sam giang thi van giao ly*. Using the traditional Luc Bat poetic form, the entire content of the *Sam giang* is closely aligned with the mystical thoughts and folk beliefs of Southern Vietnam during this period.

1.2. The Development of Hoa Hao Buddhism:

According to the Government Religious Committee (Government, 2021), the development of Hoa Hao Buddhism has undergone three phases:

- **From 1939 to 1975:** Since its establishment in 1939, Huynh Phu So was revered as the "Living Buddha" by his followers due to his "extraordinary" actions and thoughts. From 1939 to 1947, he produced important and fundamental doctrines of Hoa Hao Buddhism. This was also a period of strong development for Hoa Hao Buddhism: the doctrines were refined, and rituals were clearly established. During this phase, the growth in the number of followers was unprecedented. By 1964, the first administrative committee of Hoa Hao Buddhism officially became operational under the leadership of Mr. Luong Trong Tuong as Chairman. This is considered the beginning of the organized administration of Hoa Hao Buddhism.
- **From 1975 to May 1999:** After the complete liberation of the South and the unification of the country, in mid-1975, representatives of Hoa Hao Buddhism, namely Mrs. Huynh Thi Kim Bien and Mr. Huynh Van Quoc, announced the dissolution of all administrative committees of Hoa Hao Buddhism. From that point, the administrative organization of Hoa Hao Buddhism disbanded. However, the religious life of the followers persisted through rituals and daily practices. This means that the religious needs of the followers did not vanish; despite the absence of an administrative body, they continued to adhere to the teachings proposed by Huynh Phu So and engaged in religious activities reflecting secularization in their spiritual lives.
- **From May 1999 to the present:** The Vietnamese government has always understood the legitimate desires and needs of the majority of followers: the wish for an organized church to guide and disseminate the teachings of Hoa Hao Buddhism, as well as to have legal places for religious activities.

Based on this, on June 11, 1999, the Government Religious Committee (now the Government Religious Committee) issued Decision No. 21/QĐ/TTCP recognizing the organization and activities of the Representative Committee of Hoa Hao Buddhism (now the Central Committee of the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church). This was an important milestone, demonstrating the correctness of the policy respecting freedom of belief and religion by our Party and State, while also revitalizing the spiritual life and religious life of all Hoa Hao Buddhist followers.

The second General Assembly of the entire church in June 2004 established the church's charter. The charter reaffirmed the direction of Hoa Hao Buddhism's activities in the new period: "For the Dharma, for the nation." At the same time, the Assembly finalized the administrative organization into two levels: the Central Committee and the grassroots committee. The Central Committee is the sole legitimate representative organization for those who follow Hoa Hao Buddhism.

Through five congresses, the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church has gradually developed over 400 grassroots administrative committees at the commune, ward, and town levels, along with 14 representative committees in provinces and cities directly under the central government. As of December 2021, the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church had over 1.5 million followers, 4,000 officials, and 50 worship facilities recognized by the state. The distribution of Hoa Hao Buddhist followers is widespread across 22 provinces and cities but is uneven. The majority of followers are concentrated in nine provinces in the Southwestern region, including An Giang, Can Tho, Dong Thap, Vinh Long, Ben Tre, Hau Giang, Tien Giang, Long An, and Kien Giang (Government, 2023).

The charitable and social activities of the Hoa Hao Buddhist organization are both characteristic features and methods of spiritual practice. This also demonstrates the active engagement of the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church in social issues. The church's

charitable activities are diverse and non-discriminatory regarding ethnicity, religion, or secular life, significantly contributing to social welfare efforts: constructing and repairing rural bridges; repairing and upgrading roads; building and renovating homes for the needy; donating rice and money for relief efforts in flood-affected areas; providing free traditional and Western medicine; and assisting impoverished patients with medical consultations and treatments, among others.

1.3. The Doctrine Of Hoa Hao Buddhism:

The doctrine of Hoa Hao Buddhism is primarily expressed in the prophetic verses composed by Huynh Phu So, which include six volumes:

- Prophetic verses encouraging the practice of meditation
- The verses of the insane
- Prophetic teachings
- Awakening from delusion verses
- Encouragement of goodness
- Essential teachings for practitioners of virtue

In terms of content, the doctrine of Hoa Hao Buddhism is an adaptation and enhancement of the Buu Son Ky Huong philosophy of Doan Minh Huyen, consisting of two parts: the "Learning of Buddha" and "Cultivation of Virtue":

- **Learning of Buddha:** Completely developed on the foundation of Buddhist teachings but significantly simplified and modified slightly according to the Pure Land practice. The central spirit is to encourage followers to live virtuously.
- **Cultivation of Virtue:** Completely based on the Buu Son Ky Huong foundation, particularly the concept of "Four Graces," which includes gratitude towards ancestors and parents, gratitude for the homeland, gratitude for humanity, and gratitude for the Triple Gem.

Hoa Hao Buddhism encourages followers to learn Buddhism while cultivating virtue (a dual focus) to create merit. From the accumulation of merit, one

can become a virtuous person. However, Hoa Hao Buddhism particularly emphasizes the cultivation of virtue, asserting that spiritual practice must be based on ethics, especially the ethics of being human: Without the cultivation of virtue, one cannot learn Buddhism, or learning Buddhism without cultivating virtue is also meaningless. To attain enlightenment as a Buddha, one must first practice the ethics of being human; neglecting human virtues makes enlightenment distant.

2. An Overview of Existentialism:

2.1. The History of Existentialism:

In terms of terminology, we can refer to Simone de Beauvoir's memoirs, "La Force de l'âge," in which she explained: "Existentialism is a humanism." Through that assertion, existentialism emerged as a philosophical and literary movement that gained momentum after World War II, characterized by a profound understanding of the concept of existence. However, the roots of existentialism can be traced back to the work of philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Martin Heidegger in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Kierkegaard (1813-1855) is often regarded as the "father of existentialism." He emphasized the individual's subjective experience and choices. He argued that existence precedes essence, which means that individuals create their own meaning in life rather than having predetermined purposes.

Nietzsche (1844-1900) questioned traditional values and beliefs, famously declaring, "God is dead." He encouraged individuals to embrace their freedom and create their own values in a world devoid of inherent meaning.

Heidegger (1889-1976) explored the concept of "Being" and emphasized the importance of authenticity in existence. His work laid the groundwork for later existentialist thought, particularly in understanding the individual's relationship with the world.

After World War II, existentialism flourished as a response to the absurdity and despair experienced during the war. Notable figures such as Jean-Paul

Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir brought existentialism to the forefront of philosophical discourse.

Sartre (1905-1980) famously asserted, "Existence precedes essence," emphasizing that individuals are responsible for creating their own identities and meanings in a world devoid of inherent purpose. He explored themes of freedom, choice, and responsibility, arguing that individuals must confront the absurdity of existence and find meaning within it.

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) is best known for her work in feminist existentialism, particularly her book "The Second Sex," in which she analyzed the construction of womanhood and advocated for women's liberation. Her contributions highlighted the intersection of existentialism and gender.

In summary, existentialism emerged as a significant philosophical movement in the 20th century, addressing themes of existence, freedom, and the search for meaning in a complex and often absurd world. Its influence extends beyond philosophy into literature, art, and politics, shaping modern thought and challenging individuals to confront their own existence.

2.2. The Key Contents of Existentialism:

Despite existing in various schools of existential thought, these schools collectively focus on the meaning of human existence, succinctly referred to as the philosophy of humanity. According to Emmanuel Mounier, the stance of existentialism can be articulated as follows: "Any tendency within existential philosophy is a philosophy of humanity before it is a philosophy of the universe. Whether Christian or not, existential philosophy heavily bears the tragic nature of human experience concerning its own destiny" (Tran Thai Dinh, 2012). Similarly, philosopher Karl Jaspers summarized existential philosophy as the philosophy of human existence, a metaphysics of humanity, encompassing all reflections on human fate, primarily concerning the individual in a time of crisis regarding values, suffering, delusions, and human desires (Ngoc Thach et al., 2019).

The main contents of existential philosophy, as summarized by Emmanuel Mounier, center around twelve primary themes (Emmanuel Mounier, 1970):

- a. The uncertainty of human life, also referred to as living as surplus, characterized by a sense of being superfluous. It reflects the condition of individuals thrown into circumstances where they recognize their existence as redundant and in need of cessation, akin to suicide.
- b. The impotence of reason in understanding one's destiny. Therefore, individuals must live according to personal feelings. Through the impulses from the individual emotions of each person, one can understand the fates of others through intersubjectivity.
- c. The leap of individuals out of situations that compel them to live a superfluous life. From this, individuals, in contemporary terms, "become the best version" of themselves.
- d. Disembodiment and disembodiment.
- e. The limitations of human existence.
- f. Solitude and mystery.
- g. Nihilism.
- h. Personal transformation.
- i. Engagement and commitment.
- j. The relationship between the self and the other.
- k. A life that dares to take risks.

As researcher Tran Thai Dinh summarizes, despite these twelve themes, the entire content of existential philosophy can be condensed into two main points (Tran Thai Dinh, 2012):

- Subjectivity: Humans are not mere objects like a banyan tree, a cat, or a dog; humans possess the capacity for reflection, thought, and intention. Only humans have an inner life, only humans have self-consciousness. To say that humans possess subjectivity is to assert that they do not react like objects: objects always react in a certain way, whereas humans do not, because humans are free persons.

- Freedom: Existential philosophy often refers to humans as "beings of freedom," meaning a spiritual force that genuinely operates through its own freedom within specific circumstances of human existence. Individuals use their freedom to assume the life path they believe will develop them to their utmost potential. Each decision is an existential unit, as each decision requires careful awareness and a high sense of responsibility.

3. Existential Categories in Hoa Hao Buddhism:

Nausea:

According to researcher Tran Thai Dinh, nausea is a state of reaction to the monotonous activities of daily life. Nausea is the attitude towards the living conditions of those who have not yet risen to true heights, who live merely like plants and animals. When one awakens from disembodiment and becomes aware of their position and duty as a human being, they feel a sense of nausea because their previous life was merely concerned with living, eating, dressing, and ensuring they had sufficient comforts.

Nausea is not a state for those surplus beings like plants to feel nauseous; rather, it is these entities that provoke feelings of nausea in existential philosophers. In other words, it is precisely philosophers and those who have reached a state of true existence who truly experience nausea.

In Hoa Hao Buddhism, Huynh Phu So also exhibits a sense of "nausea" regarding reality. However, with the unique Eastern culture, Huynh Phu So's attitude of nausea is not an extreme form of vomiting as seen in the West, such as Antoine Roquentin in the work "Nausea," who experiences nausea after discovering the overwhelming disgust of the world around him, leading to profound feelings of loneliness and psychological nausea. The nausea of Huynh Phu So, and thus of Hoa Hao Buddhism, is a sigh of sorrow before the "nauseous" state of existence.

Firstly, it is a disdain for the modern context of the world: countries from Europe to Asia were falling into the Second World War; chaos and conflict

erupted everywhere, forcing beings to live lives of suffering and decay, with humanity becoming greedy and cruel; the prevalence of betrayal, disobedience, and ingratitude occurred throughout society.

Secondly, it reflects Huynh Phu So's disdain for the ascetic practices of the populace at that time.

Thirdly, it captures Huynh Phu So's disdain for the manner in which people live in the mundane world, regardless of wealth or poverty, age, intelligence, or ignorance; all share a common affliction of desire for wealth and beauty, power, and comfort, perpetually chasing after greed, leading to tragic scenes of war and bloodshed.

Disembodiment:

According to researcher Tran Thai Dinh, disembodiment refers to the state of individuals who are not consciously aware of themselves as unique persons, as disembodiment describes individuals living like everyone else, acting only because they are told to do so or think they should. There are many forms of disembodiment; idealist perspectives assert that disembodiment stems from excessive reverence for a false, dreamlike morality, which is selfish and lazy. Materialism equates humans with a mechanism for activity. However, it is action done unconsciously. Disembodiment leads individuals to live peacefully in the status quo, the objects of family, groups, parties, organizations, and religious affiliations.

In this form of disembodiment, Huynh Phu So focuses on several key arguments:

- Criticizing the hedonistic lifestyle and the obsession with Western culture, which leads to the loss of one's identity.
- Criticizing reliance on false religions or living a commonplace life of disembodiment.

Preoccupation:

According to researcher Tran Thai Dinh, preoccupation is the initial step towards ascension, faced with the feeling of nausea before the state of disembodiment.

When an individual becomes preoccupied with themselves, they gaze directly into their inner self, looking straight into their noble destiny. The most horrifying feeling for a person is realizing that no one can help them in their preoccupation. Preoccupation is a unique state, a characteristic of an existential life that has become self-aware, where an individual desires to extricate themselves from the superfluous, comfortable life of objects and disembodied individuals. Therefore, preoccupation is a driving force for movement, a turning point for ascent. Thus, the characteristic of preoccupation can be seen as restlessness, a turning point for ascension, with humans in a state of never accepting resignation. The preoccupation in Huynh Phu So's works expresses his deep concern for the responsibility of saving humanity, reflecting his anxiety and sorrow for humanity, which is full of ignorance and sin.

Ascension:

According to researcher Tran Thai Dinh, the category of ascension originated from Kierkegaard, who discussed the stages of life, stating that humans always need to ascend to reach a higher stage, specifically from aestheticism to ethics, and from ethics to religion. Moreover, Kierkegaard repeatedly opposed forms of bourgeois religion because they lull individuals into complacency, depriving them of authentic existential engagement; instead of uplifting humanity, these religions diminish human dignity, reducing them to passive objects.

In Hoa Hao Buddhism, this theme is addressed by Huynh Phu So in several aspects:

- Criticizing superstitions, superficial appearances, and deceitful displays in life.
- Subsequently emphasizing virtuous actions that reflect one's own existence, alongside practical religious existential actions chosen by the individual.

Uniqueness:

According to researcher Tran Thai Dinh, once an individual deeply realizes their unique existential nature, they will inherently feel loneliness. They

will die their own death, as no one can die for them. The unique personhood in existential thought affirms individual freedom, the capacity for self-determination, and self-definition through actions, especially the ability to transcend biases or circumstances to forge one's own path. Therefore, the individual must live that life. When one feels lonely, it is precisely when they dare to assert the uniqueness of humanity, for in any circumstance, each person possesses distinct characteristics, values, and potentials. At that moment, they dare to unleash all their unique capabilities in ways only they know how to exploit to reach their fullest potential.

In this context, Huynh Phu So has expressed proverbs about his own life, discussing his solitary existential experience. However, this is not a passive acceptance of loneliness but rather an attitude that is always prepared to create one's own history.

4. Conclusion:

The author largely agrees with researcher Tran Thai Dinh view that philosophy accompanies its categories. Each philosophical system develops its unique features through specific philosophical categories. When an individual uses any category, it reflects their approach and stance.

Thus, through analyses of existential categories in the teachings of Hoa Hao Buddhism, one can see that the teachings of Hoa Hao Buddhism, or the thoughts of Huynh Phu So, are rich with existential "qualities." This outlines a vision that philosophy has never been the exclusive domain of the West; rather, the East has its corresponding philosophical thought. Philosophy does not emerge from the sky or from self-consciousness; rather, it is shaped through lived experiences of existence, whether in the West or the East, always finding the voice to resonate with the existential realities of human existence.

On the other hand, through the parallels between Huynh Phu So thought and existentialist philosophy in the use of key categories, we can easily discern Huynh Phu So deep concern with the existential issues of his time, the human condition, as well as the path to spiritual liberation for humanity. This serves as a concrete illustration of the viewpoint expressed in the Britannica, which categorizes Huynh Phu So as a philosopher, specifically a Vietnamese philosopher.

References:

1. Dao Thien Tran. 2008. *From Existentialism to Structuralism*. Ha Noi: Knowledge Publishing House.
2. Dinh Thai Tran. 2012. *Existential philosophy*. Ha Noi: Literature Publishing House.
3. Emmanuel Mounier. 1970. *Themes of Existential Philosophy*. Nhi Nung bookshelf.
4. George Cotkin. 2003. *Existential America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
5. Government religious committee. 2023. *Religion and religious policy in Vietnam*. Vietnam: Religion Publishing House.
6. Ha Thi Thu Bui. 2012. *Hoa Hao Buddhism—Basic knowledge*. Vietnam: Encyclopedia Publisher.
7. Patrick Baert. 2015. *The existentialist moment: The rise of Sartre as a public intellectual*. Cambridge: Polity.
8. Simone de Beauvoir. 1963. *After the war: The force of circumstance, 1, 1944–1952*. New York: Paragon House.
9. Thach Ngoc Dinh, Chinh Doan Trinh & Thai Quang Tran. 2019. *Modern Western Philosophy textbook*. Ho Chi Minh City: General Publishing House.