
FREEDOM, DETERMINISM, AND CHANCE IN THE EARLY PHILOSOPHY OF SARTRE

BY

WESLEY MORRISTON

IT is well known that in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre rejected any and all forms of causal determinism—even the “psychological” determinism which finds the immediate causes of action and choice in the desires and beliefs of the agent. But if there is anything we should have learned from the history of the free-will controversy, it is that the rejection of determinism is not equivalent to the affirmation of the reality of freedom and responsibility. From the fact that an act is not causally determined, it does not follow that anyone is responsible for it. The act might, after all, be a mere matter of chance; and our idea of freedom, whatever else it may be, is certainly not that of a random series of inexplicable acts. The chief problem for a libertarian account of freedom and responsibility is therefore to say just what distinguishes a free and uncaused act from one that occurs merely by chance.

Sartre was not unaware of this difficulty, as a careful reader of *Being and Nothingness* soon discovers. In one passage he asks whether the rejection of determinism and the affirmation of freedom “means that one must view freedom as a series of capricious jerks comparable to the Epicurean Clinamen.” And in the same passage Sartre concedes that because the proponents of free-will have failed to respond satisfactorily to this challenge, “worthy thinkers have turned away from a belief in freedom.”

One could even state that determinism . . . is “more human” than the theory of free-will. In fact, while determinism throws into relief the strict conditioning of our acts, it does at least give the *reason* [*raison*] for each of them. And if it is strictly limited to the psychic, if it gives up looking for a conditioning of them in the ensemble of the universe, it shows that the reason [*raison*] for our acts is in ourselves: we act as we are, and our acts contribute to making us.¹

Sartre himself thus finds a kind of psychological determinism “more human” than a philosophy which would be unable to distinguish freedom from chance. The random swervings of an Epicurean atom are not “human” precisely because they are meaningless and inexplicable.

In this essay, I hope to show that Sartre’s philosophy of freedom is a much more

subtle defense of libertarianism than is generally supposed. It offers an analysis of the intentional character of action and choice which provides both an argument against determinism and a theory of the "fundamental project" which purports to distinguish freedom from chance. But in both cases, I will argue, the attempt is not wholly successful. Determinism is not decisively refuted and, in spite of the many important distinctions made in the course of the argument, Sartrean freedom is not ultimately distinguishable from chance. The theory of the uncaused "fundamental project" is no better able to account for freedom and responsibility than is the determinism adopted by so many of those "worthy thinkers" to whom Sartre refers. But before turning directly to the philosophy of Sartre, it will be useful to give a somewhat more precise characterization of the psychological determinism that he rejects.

I

What all forms of psychological determinism have in common are two claims: first, that all human actions and choices are causally determined; and second, that in giving a causal account of human actions and choices, psychological factors must be taken into account. The motives, the desires, the beliefs, and, ultimately the character of the agent play a decisive role in the causation of the act.

These claims may be illustrated as follows. Pierre Bezukhov has just slapped Dolokhov and challenged him to a duel. We want to know why. The answer given by the society gossips of Moscow is that Pierre believes Dolokhov has been sleeping with his beautiful but unchaste wife, that he has been dishonored, and that the only way to right matters is to challenge Dolokhov. Cooler heads counsel restraint—Dolokhov has a fearsome reputation as a duelist—but the impetuous and headstrong Pierre refuses to take their advice.

An explanation such as this may lack psychological profundity. But it is readily intelligible and it includes just what a psychological determinist would want included: viz., some reference to the *desires* of the agent ("Pierre wants to defend his honor"), to his *beliefs* about the objective situation and about the means to satisfy his desires ("Pierre believes that Dolokhov has been sleeping with his wife and he believes that a duel will restore his honor in the eyes of the world"), and, finally, to the character of the agent ("Pierre is impetuous and headstrong"). What the psychological determinist contends is that these and other facts about Pierre and the objective situation in which he finds himself provide a *causal* explanation of his behavior. Given these desires, these beliefs, this character, and this objective situation, Pierre is causally *determined* to do just what he does do: viz., to slap Dolokhov in the face and challenge him to a duel. These conditions, psychological factors prominent among them, are causally sufficient to produce just this act and to preclude any act that would be inconsistent with it. Given these conditions, Pierre could not have done otherwise.

Of course, it is still possible to ask *why* Pierre had just these desires and these beliefs. A psychological determinist is likely to refer both to facts about his character, i.e., the characteristic ways in which he responds to various situations ("Pierre has a quick temper," "He is easily insulted," "He is gullible") and to the way in which his character has been formed: perhaps Pierre was made to feel all

too keenly the fact of his illegitimacy; perhaps he simply "inherited" his father's iron will.

Whatever factors are deemed relevant, a psychological determinist may be expected to insist that there is always some such explanation and that it is a causal explanation. Given just those causal conditions, Pierre could not have had a different character. He did not, at any rate, freely choose to form his character in just this way. He didn't create his character any more than he chose to be born. Pierre's character was formed by conditions outside his control, conditions with which *he* had nothing to do. To have created his character, Pierre would have had to exist before he existed. He would have had to choose his lot as a soul in the Myth of Er chooses to be born as a king or a tradesman.

Three final remarks will serve to round out our characterization of psychological determinism.

First, in my attempt to lay out the basic tenets of any "psychological" form of determinism, I am not presupposing any particular analysis of the relation of cause and effect. I am assuming only that, whatever the analysis, there will be a sense in which, the cause being given, the effect cannot fail to be or occur: the agent could not do otherwise.

Second, I take any form of psychological determinism to be a doctrine which could be true even if "universal determinism"—i.e., the view that every event and every state-of-affairs has a cause—were false. Even if there are events in the "history" of the universe without any cause—even if, for example, an alpha particle just happens by chance to "tunnel out" of the nucleus of a particular uranium atom at a particular time—every *human act* might be such that its occurrence is determined by prior causes.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that psychological determinism is *psychological* determinism. There need be no question here of eliminating "mentalistic" concepts from the description of human action or of giving a "reductionistic" analysis which would replace talk about desires, beliefs, motives, reasons, and character traits with talk about physical processes—brain events and the like. A psychological determinist may even claim—many have—that a bodily movement is not an *act* at all unless the desires of the agent figure prominently among its causes. In any case, it is important to remember that we are not here considering a mechanistic form of determinism. So far from being ruled out, concepts like "intention" and "purpose" are considered essential to the description of action.

II

With this brief account of psychological determinism in mind, we can turn directly to Sartre's philosophy of freedom. Sartre will hold: (1) that psychological determinism is incompatible with human freedom and responsibility; (2) that psychological determinism is false; and (3) that we are free and responsible agents.

First, the incompatibility thesis. Sartre does not so much argue, as take it for granted, that a *free* act cannot be causally determined. And it is not hard to see why. If psychological determinism is true, there must be a very strong sense in which we never *can* do anything other than what we *actually* do; so that it is no

more true to say of a man that he could have done otherwise than to say of a pane of glass that it could have avoided breaking, although it did in fact break. Of course it is not *less* true. The pane of glass would not have broken *if* a brick had not been hurled directly at it. And similarly, a man would have acted differently *if* his desires, his beliefs, or his character had been different. But that, I feel certain Sartre would say, has no more tendency to show that the man is free and responsible than that the pane of glass is responsible for the fact that it was broken. If Sartre had been a determinist, I feel certain that he would have been a "hard" determinist.

But Sartre is not a determinist. A belief in psychological determinism, he thinks, is one of several devices we use to hide our absolute freedom from ourselves, to suppress the anguished awareness of the fact that we could have been, and can still be, radically different. On the other hand, Sartre is not a *simple* indeterminist. He does deny that human acts and choices are causally determined; but at the same time he insists that they have another *kind* of explanation. Simple indeterminism would leave out just what—for Sartre—is essential to an action, viz., its intentional character. "It is strange," Sartre writes, "that philosophers have been able to argue endlessly about determinism and free-will . . . without attempting first to make explicit the structures contained in the very idea of an *action*."² To act, Sartre tells us, is to bring about a change in the world. But it is also to do so for the sake of an end: every act is intentional in that it is animated by the conscious project of an end for the sake of which the act is performed. Obviously the end, if it is an *end*, is *not yet realized*. If the war is already won, the battle loses its point. I might fight to preserve what has been won, but the very preservation which is my end refers us to a future which has not yet arrived, a future in which the territory gained would be held. Even if I act for the sake of an end which is already realized and which does not need to be preserved (e.g., if I try to kill an enemy soldier who is already dead), it can only be because I *believe* that the goal has not been achieved and because I *intend* to realize the goal by my act.

But don't we sometimes do things *unintentionally*? In a sense, yes—our acts frequently, perhaps always, have unintended consequences. Sartre would insist only that every genuine action (as opposed to a mere chance happening) is performed for *some* reason. The careless smoker who blows up the powder magazine does not do so intentionally, but he does do *something* intentionally—he throws away his cigarette.

From this claim—that every act is *in some respect* intentional—Sartre believes it follows that there is no act without a reason and a motive. Thus, "at the outset," he tells us:

. . . we can see what is lacking in those tedious discussions between determinists and the proponents of free-will. The latter are concerned to find cases of decision for which there exists no prior reason, or deliberations concerning two opposed acts which are equally possible and possess reasons of exactly the same weight. To which the determinist may easily reply that there is no action without a reason and that the most insignificant gesture (raising the right hand rather than the left hand, etc.) refers to reasons and motives which confer its meaning upon it. Indeed the case could not be otherwise since every action must be *intentional*; each action must, in fact, have an end, and the end in turn is referred to a reason.³

Sartre is therefore just as insistent as any determinist in saying that there is an explanation for every genuine action. It is the nature of the explanation that will make his theory indeterministic and set the stage for his theory of radical freedom. Every act has a motive and a reason—granted. But what the psychological determinist lacks is an adequate analysis of motive and reason. “. . . The determinists in turn,” Sartre tells us,

are weighing the scale by stopping their investigations with the mere designation of the reason and the motive. The essential question lies beyond the complex organization “reason-intention-act-end”; indeed, we ought to ask how a reason (or motive) can be constituted as such.⁴

Motive and reason are not “necessitating causes” as the psychological determinist takes them to be. But then how *are* they related to the act? Or, what amounts to the same thing, what is it that makes a motive a motive, and a reason a reason for acting? The answer is that my free project of an end constitutes reason and motive as such. Only in the light of my freely chosen end can anything count as a reason or motive for acting in one way rather than another.

Suppose, for example, that I am on the battle-field and that I have just fired my gun, killing one of the enemy. We are certainly entitled, on Sartre’s view, to ask, “Why did I fire the gun?” Moreover there must be an answer. In this case the answer might be: “Because I wanted to kill one of the enemy and help win the battle; and because I saw an enemy soldier over there, behind that tree.” What we must understand, however, is that my *desire* is not a “psychic state” which causally necessitates my act of firing the gun; on the contrary, it is constituted *as* a motive for acting by my free choice of an end which is not yet actual (“to kill one of the enemy”). Similarly my *perception* of the enemy soldier behind the tree is not a causal condition of my act; the objective state-of-affairs which confronts me and which I perceive is constituted *as* a reason for acting only in the light of my chosen end.

My act is not causally determined by the motive or the reason—it is not causally determined by anything. But that doesn’t make it blind or aimless. On the contrary, it contains within itself the choice of its own end. It is this choice which Sartre terms a “project.” Motive and reason, far from being external causes, belong to the essential structure of the act; every act has a motive and a reason because every act is informed by the project of an end. “The result,” Sartre says,

is that it is in fact impossible to find an act without a motive but that this does not mean that we must conclude that the motive causes the act; the motive is an integral part of the act. For as the resolute project toward a change is not distinct from the act, the motive, the act, and the end are all constituted in a single upsurge It is the act which decides its ends, and its motives, and the act is the expression of freedom.⁵

It is important to note that I may be only “non-thetically” aware of my project, a bit of terminology that needs explaining. It is axiomatic for Sartre that consciousness is always self-conscious. My choices are necessarily conscious choices. But this does not mean that I am always explicitly thinking about them, making them the explicit objects of a second order, reflecting consciousness. “Reflection,” Sartre wrote in *The Transcendence of the Ego*, “poisons desire.”

On the unreflected level I bring Peter help because Peter is experienced as "having to be helped." But if my state is suddenly transformed into a reflected state, there I am watching myself act, in the sense in which one says of oneself that he listens to himself talk. It is no longer Peter who attracts me; it is my helpful consciousness which appears to me as having to be perpetuated.⁶

We all know the difference between simply acting and watching ourselves act. Sartre's assertion that consciousness is always self-conscious does not deny this difference. What he is claiming is only that, even when I am not explicitly aware of my action, I have an implicit sense of what I am doing which guides my activity. In some cases, thinking explicitly about my doing may even make me that much less effective in doing it. If I think about my desire to help Peter and about my efforts in his behalf, instead of thinking about Peter and the ways in which he can best be helped, I am that much less likely to succeed in helping Peter. But even when I am straightforwardly involved in helping Peter, I am not simply ignorant of what I am doing; I have an implicit sense of what I am about, of the point of doing this or that, of my ends and my motives. It is this implicit sense of my choices of means and ends that Sartre terms "non-thetic self-consciousness."

If, then, there is a sense in which I always know what I am about, if I am aware of the choices which guide my behavior, this need not be an explicit awareness. In the case of some projects, most notably what Sartre calls the "fundamental project," it may even be extremely difficult for me to articulate them to myself or to others. In one sense of "know," I may not know what my project is. It may take prolonged existential psychoanalysis to bring me to an explicit recognition of my fundamental choice of myself. I will return to this point later, for it is crucial to Sartre's theory of freedom and his claim that the will is only *one* of the manifestations of freedom. For the present, it will help us understand a distinction of which Sartre makes a great deal, but which has not been emphasized in the preceding discussion: the distinction, namely, between motive and reason.

Both motive and reason, we said, are constituted as such by the free project which makes the act intentional, i.e., makes it an act. The distinction between them is the distinction between consciousness and its object; between the *subjective* motive and the *objective* reason; between consciousness itself in so far as "it experiences itself non-thetically as a project more or less keen, more or less passionate, toward an end,"⁷ and the object of consciousness in so far as it is experienced in the light of that freely projected end as a reason for acting. To revert to a previous example, I see Peter's distress *as* a *reason* for helping him only in so far as my present consciousness *non-thetically* apprehends itself in the light of my project of helping. I am *thetically* aware of "Peter having to be helped" and *non-thetically* aware of my project of helping. Motive and reason are distinct, but correlative, moments of the same structure.

. . . [T]he reason, the motive, and the end are the three indissoluble terms of the thrust of a free and living consciousness which projects itself toward its possibilities and makes itself defined by these possibilities.⁸

II

Now we can turn to Sartre's argument against psychological determinism. What is essential to the argument is the claim, elaborated above, that every act is—at

least to some degree—intentional. However successful or unsuccessful I may be in the attainment of my ends, my act is intentionally directed to an end which is *not yet* actual. It is this “negative” aspect of the act to which Sartre appeals in his argument against determinism. An act cannot be determined by an antecedent cause precisely because it involves the project of an end which is *not yet* realized. In a characteristic passage, Sartre puts the argument as follows:

No factual state whatever it may be (the political and economic structure of society, the psychological “state,” etc.) is capable by itself of motivating any act whatsoever. For an act is a projection of the for-itself toward what is not, and what is can in no way by itself determine what is not.⁹

The argument appears to have two premises:

1. An act is (in part) a “projection . . . toward what is not.”
- and
2. “. . . [W]hat is can in no way by itself determine what is not.”

The conclusion:

3. No factual state (“what is”) can causally determine an action.

Now quite apart from a certain obscurity, the argument *appears* to be fallacious. Granted that what is cannot causally determine what is not, it doesn’t follow that what is cannot determine the projecting (the intending) of what is not. The projecting (intending) of an end is perfectly real, even if the end projected is not yet real. Even if we accept Sartre’s premises, therefore, it seems that we need not accept his conclusion: that we need not deny that our acts with their intentions are causally determined. The argument *appears* to rest on a confusion between the intention and what is intended, between consciousness and its object. The former belongs to the domain of “what is” even if the latter does not. Such a confusion is so unlikely in the case of a phenomenologist, particularly in that of a phenomenologist who makes as much of the “intentionality” of consciousness as does Sartre, that we may feel that Sartre couldn’t possibly mean what he appears to be saying in the passage quoted above. In fact, I believe, this feeling is justified.

I think what Sartre had in mind in this passage is that no purely factual state of affairs can determine a conscious being to apprehend it *as* a reason for acting in one way rather than another. Why? Because to apprehend the objective situation as a reason for acting, for bringing about a *change* in the world, is to apprehend it as *lacking* in a certain respect. It is to apprehend it as a situation in which a desirable end is *not yet* realized. But the objective situation does not and cannot evaluate itself in the light of what is *not*, cannot constitute itself as lacking in any respect.

. . . [T]he most beautiful girl in the world can offer only what she *has*, and in the same way the most miserable situation can by itself be designated only as it *is* without any reference to an ideal nothingness.¹⁰

Any such evaluation can come only from a conscious being who freely interprets the situation in the light of an end which it freely projects for itself. So while the objective situation (“what is”) may be the reason for acting in a certain way, it is so only in the light of a freely chosen end. *By itself* it has no causal efficacy. It cannot cause us to apprehend it in one way rather than another. The act, therefore, since the intention of what is not yet actual belongs to its structure as an act, cannot be causally determined by the objective situation, by “what is.”

The foregoing will serve as an *argument* against psychological determinism, however, only in the context of the entire Sartrean ontology. It does make explicit one of the central assumptions of that ontology, viz., that conscious beings are related to the world of which they are conscious in a way which makes them free and incapable of being causally determined by that world of which they are conscious. Sartre is assuming that nothing (of which consciousness is conscious, at any rate) can cause us to choose in one way rather than another.

But even if we make that assumption, the following question still arises: viz., are the objects of which I am thetically aware and which constitute my reasons for acting, the only candidates for causing my action? Might not something of which I am only non-thetically aware, or of which I am not conscious at all, cause me to choose as I do and to act in the light of the ends that I choose? The facts about subliminal advertising and post-hypnotic suggestion spring to mind as cases of just such unconscious (or implicitly conscious) influences.

The lesson, of course, is not that Sartre's theory of freedom is erroneous or that psychological determinism is true. The lesson is only that Sartre has failed to demonstrate that psychological determinism is false.

IV

Let us then turn directly to Sartre's positive account of the free choice. The position, as I have elaborated it thus far, is that our acts are neither chance happenings nor causally determined events. Not chance happenings, because every act has its reason and its motive. Not causally determined events, because reason and motive are constituted as such by the free choice of an end.

The problem which I want to discuss here is this: does this analysis of the concept of an action suffice to distinguish freedom from chance? True, we have found it possible to answer the question, "Why this act rather than another?" without resorting to talk of causal determination by antecedent conditions. But we must also ask, "Why this *choice* rather than another?" If there is no answer, or if the answer is "no reason," then the freedom of the choice has been exposed as mere chance. But if there is a reason, we must ask what makes it a reason. Is it constituted as a reason in the light of a higher order choice of an end? But then we must ask with regard to that choice: could I have chosen otherwise? And if so, why did I make this choice rather than some other? It might appear at this point that, in order to avoid the Scylla of chance, Sartre must perpetually refer each choice to a reason, and in order to avoid the Charybdis of causal determination, he must refer each reason to the free choice of an end. Are we then faced with an infinite regress? An infinite regress of choices motivated by reasons constituted as reasons by higher order choices motivated by reasons and choices of a yet higher order? No, says Sartre. The attempt to understand why someone has acted in a certain way culminates in the recognition of a choice for which no reason can be given, but which is not a mere matter of chance because it is "fundamental." In the light of this choice, a human life appears as a coherent whole, but there is no larger whole in terms of which *this* choice is to be understood. When addressed to this choice, the question "Why?" cannot be answered. But that is not inimical to freedom and responsibility because the question is in some sense inappropriate.

Thus we arrive at Sartre's famous theory of the "original choice" or the "fundamental project." The problem for a positive, Sartrean account of freedom is to say what a fundamental project is and to explain why it is inappropriate at this "fundamental" level to ask the question, "Why this project and not some other?"

What, then, is a "fundamental project?" For Sartre, every fundamental project is an attempt to solve the insoluble "problem of being," to realize the impossible synthesis of the in-itself and the for-itself, to achieve the security of something which merely is what it is, while retaining the freedom of the being whose being is perpetually in question. Important as this claim is in Sartre's system as a whole, it is not crucial to our question about responsibility. What is important for our question is that each fundamental project is a concrete, but global choice of my being in the world. If I do choose the impossible synthesis of the in-itself and the for-itself as my value, I will strive to realize that value in a particular way. Thus: "I will make myself be the thief that others have made of me." Or: "I will make myself be the one who subjects everyone and everything to critical scrutiny." Or: "I will make myself be the one who saves the world." Or: "I will make myself be the rejected son that I am." The possibilities are infinite. But whichever I choose, if it is indeed my "original" choice, my "fundamental" project, then it should illuminate each of my acts. They should make sense in the light of my original choice of myself. We should be able to say, at the conclusion of our analysis, "Yes, that is what *he*—i.e., the one who makes this original choice of himself—would do in this situation; that, or something very like it." The qualification, "or something like it," is important because Sartre has no wish to say that, given my original choice of myself and given the situation in which I find myself, I could not help doing exactly what I do—e.g., using just this piece of chalk to write just this word on the blackboard. No, the relation between the fundamental project and those choices which are subsidiary to it is comparable to the relation between a *Gestalt* and those partial structures which can be altered without fundamentally altering the total configuration. Each one makes sense in the context of the whole, but not all are infallibly required for the preservation of the *Gestalt*. One might say, in line with this analogy, that the particular choice is made more or less probable by the global one, but that it is not necessitated by it. There is, in the last analysis, a certain amount of room for free play. Some responses to the situation are open to me and some are not open, or at least are very unlikely. The act is not therefore a chance happening—given my fundamental project and the situation in which I found myself, something of the sort had to be done. But neither is it *necessitated*: I could have done something else which would have been equally compatible with my fundamental project.

It must be emphasized that the fundamental project, and not only the acts that it explains, is free. I could have chosen, and I still can choose myself in a wholly different way. As long as I exist, I am defined, not only by what I have been and done, but also by what I can still do, by my possibilities for change—even total and radical change. The possibility of complete conversion is never finally ruled out. Anxiety, said Kierkegaard, is "the next day." In anguish, I recognize that I may not keep the appointment that I have made with myself for tomorrow. Not that death or illness or a sudden accident may prevent me, although these things too are possible. It is rather that I cannot count on *myself*; tomorrow I may choose myself in a radically different way. I am perpetually "threatened" by the possibility,

Sartre says at one point, of being "exorcised,"¹¹ of being, in effect, changed into another person, a person with a radically different fundamental project, a person that I would perhaps despise were I to meet him today.

Most of the time we seek to escape this anguish, this consciousness of our freedom, by adopting one or another attitude in "bad faith." A belief in psychological determinism may *excuse* me or a belief in a God who has established absolute values may appear to *justify* me. But the truth which I carry within me as the anguished sense of my own freedom is that I am *unjustified* and *without excuse*.

V

Do we now have a positive conception of freedom which suffices to distinguish it from mere chance? The fundamental project has been found to be the ultimate locus of freedom; and we have been told, in effect, that this project is unjustifiable and inexplicable. What, then, distinguishes it from a chance happening? Does not the very description of anguish suggest that *I* am not the author of the choice? It is as if I were threatened with having a choice made for me by someone else.

There are at least two ways in which Sartre might respond to this challenge. First, he repeatedly insists that *I am* my fundamental project. The project does not come from without; I do not have this choice—I am this choice, perpetually making and remaking itself. To this it is tempting to reply: "In that case, there is no real sense in which you could have chosen differently; had you done so, you would not be you, but someone else." Such a response is surely invited by Sartre's description of anguish as the fear of being exorcised. But in spite of that, it is not hard to imagine how Sartre might reply. "The objection," he might say, "confuses the mode of being of the for-itself with that of the in-itself. When I say that *I am* my fundamental project, I do not mean that I am it in the manner of a thing which is limited to being what it is. I am also not it; i.e., I am also the possibility of radically changing myself; it is this possibility which is experienced in anguish. So there is no contradiction in saying that I, defined by this project, might choose a new project. I am already defined by the potentiality of other choices."

Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that Sartre can answer the objection when cast in *this* form. The choice is not something that happens to me; it, along my potentialities for change, is what I am. Even so, someone may still want to ask: why did you make this choice? Did you choose yourself in this fundamental way for no reason? Then is it not a mere matter of chance that you did so? This brings us to the second of Sartre's responses to our challenge. "Chance," he might say, "is not merely the absence of explanation—it is the absence of explanation *where we have a right to ask for one*. But in this sense my fundamental project is not a mere matter of chance; it is the condition of the very possibility of explanations, the condition of the possibility of anything counting *as* a reason for or against a particular, non-fundamental choice. The free, fundamental project cannot meaningfully be said to be a matter of chance just because it is fundamental." I think Heidegger had something like this in mind when he wrote that the essence of reasons (or grounds) is freedom. And Sartre may well have been thinking of Heidegger's essay, *Von Wesen des Grundes*, when he wrote the following:

. . . [T]his choice is not absurd in the sense in which in a rational universe a phenomenon might arise which would not be bound to others by any *reasons*. It is absurd in this sense—that the choice is that by which all foundations come into being, that by which the very notion of the absurd has a meaning. It is absurd in being beyond all reasons.¹²

Two sense of “absurdity” are distinguished here. In one sense of the word, an event would be “absurd” if it is a matter of chance relative to a certain rational order. And Sartre is saying that the fundamental project cannot be absurd in this sense because it is the condition of the possibility of any rational order at all. It cannot be a matter of chance, because at this, fundamental level of analysis, there is no rational order to contrast it with, no causes or reasons or grounds of any kind to appeal to for an answer to the question, “Why this choice and not some other?” This choice is itself the original reason or ground.

It is important to see that in the present sense of the word, “reasons” are grounds or explanations of any kind. If we admitted that there are grounds or “foundations” of any kind in things as they are independently of the fundamental project, then it would be meaningful even at this level of analysis to ask why I chose in this original way; and it would be meaningful to ask whether my original choice of myself occurs merely by chance. We would be faced with our original dilemma: *either* there is an explanation, in which case we want to know what kind of explanation it is and whether having an explanation in that sense is compatible with freedom and responsibility; *or* my original choice of myself is a mere matter of chance, in which case I am certainly not responsible for it. Doubtless this is the reason for the Sartrean move under consideration—viz., that of placing the fundamental project “beyond reasons,” making it a condition of the possibility of reasons or grounds of *any kind*, making it “that by which all foundations come into being.” In my view, this “move” leads to an unacceptable form of idealism. It makes my conscious project the author of everything *but* the sheer *being* of things, and not only of my deeds. And it makes it difficult, if not impossible to distinguish between reality and appearance. It is difficult to see how so “radical” a freedom could be limited in any way, how there could be such a thing as “facticity.”¹³

Whether I am right about this or not, it is interesting to note that in the passage quoted above, Sartre distinguishes a second sense of “absurdity,” a sense in which the fundamental project *is* absurd. It is absurd, he says, in being “beyond all reasons.” In much the same vein Sartre repeatedly declares that we are “unjustified” in our very being. It is not as if there were any justification to be found. There is none. And, indeed, if Sartre is right in averring that the being which would found its being is impossible, there could be none.

It has been well said that Sartre is a disappointed rationalist. He tacitly asks the very question that his own philosophy forbids him to ask: why this fundamental project and not some other? It is only if I *ask* that question that I *experience* myself as unjustified. Similarly, it is only if I *demand* an explanation of the existence of anything at all that I experience the absurdity and brute contingency of existence in what Sartre describes as “nausea.” If the demand itself is meaningless, then the failure of ourselves and the world to satisfy it should not disappoint us. Anguish and nausea are based on a misunderstanding and man is not a “useless passion.” Much of what is characteristic of Sartre’s existentialism is lost. But if the demand is *not* meaningless, Sartrean freedom is indistinguishable from chance and we are

no more responsible for our acts than we would be if psychological determinism were true.

I do not count myself among those who find "unanswerable questions" meaningless or without point, which is as much as to say that I too am a "disappointed rationalist." But that is not the issue here. What I want to do in conclusion is simply to point out how very far the Sartrean conception of freedom is from our ordinary notions about deliberation and choice.

It is at least often the case that when we speak about free-will we are thinking of a decision which issues from a process of deliberation in which several alternatives are considered and rejected. But deliberation, and the fully conscious choice which I can articulate to myself and to others are but surface phenomena in Sartre's scheme of things. In the ordinary course of an ordinary life, choice is only non-thetically conscious of itself as choice, and there is not any explicit awareness of what could have been chosen instead. Deliberation and the act of will which issues from it are not a privileged expression of freedom. It is only in the light of a choice which is already implicitly made that the motives and reasons about which I deliberate have their weight. The deliberate, voluntary act is no *more*—but also no less—an expression of freedom than the hasty and ill-considered act of passion. The true locus of freedom is a choice which is scarcely ever explicitly aware of itself. This is why Sartre writes:

When the will intervenes, the decision is taken, and it has no other value than that of making the announcement.¹⁴

For similar reasons, Sartre holds that I can always surprise myself with deeds which are wholly out of keeping with my self-image. The ego, after all, is in his view a mere fiction which I construct for myself only on the plane of reflection, a fiction which enables me to escape the awareness of my own freedom and responsibility. If the young bride cited by Janet is afraid of sitting at her window and summoning the passersby like a prostitute, this is not merely because of something in her education or her past. What she is experiencing, Sartre tells us, is

... a "vertigo of possibility." She finds herself monstrously free, and this vertiginous freedom appeared to her as *the opportunity* for this action which she was afraid of doing.¹⁵

At this point, ordinary reflective consciousness, with its comforting sense of a permanent self which serves as a guarantee for my future behavior, gives way. I experience myself as "monstrously free," as "escaping" from myself "on all sides."¹⁶ At one point in *The Transcendence of the Ego*, Sartre even speaks of my spontaneous choice as something "beyond freedom!"¹⁷ It is, at any rate, quite beyond our ordinary notions about free-will, so that in the last analysis Sartrean freedom seems indistinguishable from a random series of inexplicable choices—a notion which, as we noted earlier, Sartre himself takes to be less "human" than the psychological determinism that he rejects.

But the failure of Sartre's theory is instructive, for there is a lesson to be drawn from its difficulties, a lesson concerning the nature of choice. It is that, as Sartre concedes with regard to every choice save the fundamental one, there is no such thing as a *choice* which is completely or in principle inexplicable. Every choice

essentially involves an appeal to the values of the chooser—to what he takes to be good, right, proper, desirable, or at least in some very broad sense worth doing. It is doubtful whether I can simply *choose* to value anything. If, for example, I see no point in the generous impulse of a philanthropist, I cannot simply “decide” to find it praiseworthy. But even if I could, I would have to do so in the light of values, preferences, or standards which I did not at the same time call into question. I cannot at one stroke bring all reasons into being. If there is something like Sartre’s “fundamental project,” if there is some one central theme which brings together the varied strands of my life in a meaningful pattern, it is not a project that I *choose*. Precisely because it is the ultimate explanation of all my choices, it is not itself a choice. But a fundamental project which is not a choice could not be the ultimate locus of freedom in a libertarian philosophy. For it would not be so very different from what the psychological determinist calls “character”—a given for which a man cannot justly be held responsible.

University of Colorado
Boulder, Colorado

NOTES

¹ Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness*, tr. by Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), pp. 452–453. Hereafter cited as *BN*.

² *BN*, p. 433.

³ *BN*, p. 436. Here and throughout the paper, I have rendered Sartre’s “*motif*” as “reason” rather than “cause.” This is the only point on which I have not followed the Barnes translation.

⁴ *BN*, p. 437.

⁵ *BN*, pp. 437–438.

⁶ Sartre, Jean-Paul, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, tr. by Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Noonday, 1957), p. 59. Hereafter cited as *TE*.

⁷ *BN*, p. 449.

⁸ *BN*, p. 449.

⁹ *BN*, p. 435.

¹⁰ *BN*, p. 434.

¹¹ *BN*, p. 475.

¹² *BN*, p. 479.

¹³ I tried to make this point at greater length in an earlier paper—“Heidegger on the World”—published in *Man and World*, Volume 5, No. 4, pp. 453–467.

¹⁴ *BN*, p. 451.

¹⁵ *TE*, p. 100.

¹⁶ *TE*, p. 100.

¹⁷ *TE*, p. 100.