

## **Abstract: Freedom's Spontaneity      Jonathan Gingerich**

Many of us have experienced a peculiar feeling of freedom, of the world being open before us. This is the feeling that is captured by phrases like “the freedom of the open road” and “free spirits,” and, to quote Phillip Larkin, “free bloody birds” going “down the long slide / To happiness, endlessly.” This feeling is associated with the ideas that my life could go in many different directions and that there is a vast range of things that I could become. It arises in concert with a wide range of human experiences, including experiences of artistic creation, play, fun, and resistance to authority.

This freedom of openness and spontaneity, which I call *spontaneous freedom*, is central to our ordinary talk about freedom. Yet it is a phenomenon largely ignored in discussions of freedom in contemporary moral philosophy. This is because moral philosophers are primarily concerned to identify the sort of freedom that is a prerequisite for moral responsibility, and so focus on deliberate, voluntary action rooted in rational choice. When moral philosophers do discuss spontaneous freedom, it is often to disparage it as, in the words of Harry Frankfurt, the freedom of “the wanton” whose liberty is merely that of “anarchic impulsive behavior.”

My dissertation develops a theory of spontaneous freedom and of the role it does and should play in our lives, including our moral and political lives. I argue that, to do full justice to the human aspiration for freedom, moral and political theory must recognize the value of spontaneity. Through a study of characters from stories and films by Virginia Woolf, Saki, Akira Kurosawa, and Aman Sethi, I develop a phenomenological account of the nature of spontaneous freedom. I argue that we experience spontaneous freedom when we experience our actions as arising out of ourselves but not fixed in advance either by the decisions of other agents or by our own preexisting commitments or plans.

I further argue that spontaneous freedom is valuable because it allows for the distinctive pleasure of feeling that one's life is unfortold and that one is among the sources of novelty in the world, a feeling that is central to artistic creativity. It also affords solace from the anxiety associated with the inevitability of death. As with many experiences, like falling in love or seeing an alpine lake, experiences of spontaneous freedom are most valuable when they are veridical. But even the subjective experience of spontaneous freedom, I suggest, activates our awareness of and openness to possibility. Achieving this awareness, at least on occasion, is valuable because it provides us with a sense of our own psychological potential and sharpens a skill that contributes to practical deliberation.

My claim that spontaneous freedom is valuable conflicts with a popular account of the self. According to that account—endorsed by a number of moral philosophers but most famously associated with Christine Korsgaard—the ideal self is one that is well-ordered, actively constituted through rational deliberation. Such *integrity theories* of the self are attractive because they provide an account of agency according to which ideal moral agents invariably endorse their own actions and beliefs. Integrity theories view freedom as involving rational, deliberative control of one's actions. But I argue that integrity theories forbid well-constituted moral agents to seek out experiences of spontaneous freedom: such agents must act in a manner that they antecedently and reflectively endorse, while spontaneous freedom requires acting in a manner not antecedently fixed by one's own decisions. Insofar as spontaneous

freedom is a kind of freedom that we do and should value, my account exerts pressure on this standard view of agency and the self.

My account of spontaneous freedom also has important political implications. One version of liberal theory holds that the only sort of political freedom worth having is the freedom of each individual to effectively exercise choice compatibly with every other individual doing likewise. On this picture, I have all of the freedom that I could want if I am able to choose autonomously and act in accordance with my choices. But I argue that a community that secures this liberal variety of freedom does not yet provide its members with all the freedom for which people rightly yearn. When public and private institutions arrange our circumstances in ways that make the courses of our lives predictable, our own choices about how to act may be largely settled by the plans and decisions of other agents. This in turn makes it difficult for us to regard our futures as open in the way that is characteristic of experiences of spontaneous freedom. States should promote spontaneous freedom by providing the material and social preconditions for us to feel that our lives could head in radically different and unanticipated directions.