

SPONTANEOUS FREEDOM

Jonathan Gingerich

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§ 0. Abstract

Spontaneous freedom, the freedom of unplanned and unscripted activity enjoyed by “free spirits,” is central to ordinary talk about “freedom.” However, spontaneous freedom is absent from many contemporary moral philosophers’ accounts of freedom, which are concerned primarily to identify the sort of freedom that is prerequisite for full-fledged moral responsibility. Drawing from a range of literary cases, I undertake a phenomenological study of spontaneous freedom. I argue that to experience spontaneous freedom is to experience one’s activity as not settled in advance by anyone else’s conscious, reflective plans or even by one’s own conscious plans. Recognizing the value of spontaneous freedom contributes to the free will debate by helping to make sense of the libertarian demand for incompatibilist freedom on the ground that compatibilist freedom cannot suffice for genuine creativity and originality. The experience of spontaneous freedom provides for much of the creativity that the libertarian is after, but does not require any metaphysical commitment to incompatibilism. Because our individual and collective decisions impact the extent to which experiences of spontaneous freedom are possible, the problem of freedom and creativity turns out to be an ethical and political problem about how to provide social circumstances that make spontaneous freedom possible, rather than a metaphysical problem about the truth or falsity of determinism.

§ 1. Introduction

Many people have experienced a peculiar airy feeling of freedom, of the world being open before them. This feeling of *spontaneous freedom* 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” (Larkin 2004, 129). This feeling is associated with the ideas that my life could go in many different directions and that there is an infinite range of things that I could become.

While spontaneous freedom is central to our ordinary talk about freedom, contemporary moral philosophers who write about freedom typically disregard or even disparage it, focusing instead on the sort of freedom that is a prerequisite for moral

responsibility or autonomy.¹ On these views of freedom, the question of whether or not a person is “free” hinges on the truth of metaphysical theses about causation, on the fundamental nature of the mind, or on the political circumstances that shape a person’s life. In contrast, the conditions that make it apt to call someone a “free spirit” have to do with whether the person behaves whimsically or spontaneously or how they engage in play. The intense experiences of freedom characteristic of moments in which people see themselves as free spirits are typically transitory, in contrast to the sort of experience that is a precondition for agency or responsibility, which is a much more prosaic and pervasive experience that a person has whenever they take an action for which they can aptly be blamed or praised.

Other philosophers have attended to spontaneous freedom to a greater extent, such as philosophers of free will who are concerned with “the desire for freshness, novelty, genuine creation—in short, an open rather than a closed universe” (Barrett 1958, 31). However, while such approaches have generated robust theories of creativity, they have largely overlooked the phenomenology of spontaneity, or have invoked it only in passing, as part of a larger argument against compatibilism.² Philosophers who have accorded greater attention to spontaneity, on

¹ Moral philosophers often regard freedom either as a relationship between a person and the world, where freedom is about whether a person has the power to cause events (Sartorio 2012) or the power to control one’s actions (Fischer 2012), or as a relationship among people, where freedom is about the absence of political domination (Pettit 1996) or about individual agents’ ability to make choices under conditions that provide at least the minimum resources to exercise choice effectively (Feinberg 1971; Dworkin 1972; Raz 1986). Other moral philosophers regard freedom as something that involves the internal structure of a person or the configuration of a person’s mind or attitudes (Frankfurt 1988; Korsgaard 1996). All of these approaches describe forms of freedom that should always or almost always be present for attributions of moral responsibility to be apt or for political justice to obtain.

² Patrick Suppes is a notable exception, connecting freedom and openness and proposing a phenomenological measure of freedom as uncertainty about the future (Suppes 1995, 187). But Suppes is concerned with an experience that may not involve any deep sense of openness about the future of one’s own life. For Suppes, any amount of uncertainty about, for instance, what consumers will purchase in a market “guarantees that freedom remains” in the market (Suppes 1997, 83). Spontaneous freedom as I describe it involves something more than the freedom of consumer choice.

the other hand, have tended to overlook or deny its connection to everyday conceptions of freedom.³

In this essay, I argue that spontaneous freedom is an important variety of freedom. We yearn to experience spontaneous freedom because it often provides us with an awareness of our creative power, a sense of individuality, or an experience of independence from even our own plans and conscious decisions. Many people want this sort of freedom badly enough to remake their lives, both individually and collectively, to make room for greater spontaneity.

In the following section, I describe what it is like, first-personally, for a range of literary characters to experience spontaneous freedom. In the third section, I abstract from these cases to develop a phenomenological account of the experience. I identify the core characteristics of subjective experiences of spontaneous freedom, distinguishing it from cognate phenomena, and describe the ways in which people value spontaneous freedom and how their valuations depend on the contexts in which they experience it. In the fourth section, I show how the phenomenology of spontaneous freedom can inform philosophical debates on free will. Many libertarian incompatibilists—those who believe that determinism is incompatible with free will and determinism is false—think that compatibilist freedom lacks the sparkle of freshness and originality that true freedom requires. However, spontaneous freedom provides an opportunity for agents to experience the freshness and originality that the libertarian is after without requiring any commitment to incompatibilist metaphysics. I argue that the problem of free will, insofar as it involves creativity, turns out to be not a metaphysical problem but a political problem about how to make experiences of spontaneous freedom widely available.

³ Maria Kronfeldner, for instance, has developed a theory of creativity that is compatible with a naturalistic metaphysics but argues that “metaphysical freedom and creativity [and with it spontaneity]—should simply be kept apart” (Kronfeldner 2009, 592).

§ 2. The Experience of Spontaneous Freedom

At its core, the experience of spontaneous freedom is the experience of our activities as arising out of ourselves but not fixed in advance either by the decisions of other agents or by our own existing commitments or plans. Spontaneous freedom thus gives rise to the feeling that one's life is open, rather than closed. To experience spontaneous freedom is not to engage in a species of action, but to prospectively regard our activities in a certain way. We can regard our activities as settled in advance to a greater or lesser degree, so the experience of spontaneous freedom is scalar, rather than an all-or-nothing phenomenon.

In this section, I enrich this initial statement of the nature of spontaneous freedom by exploring the subjective experiences of freedom reported by a variety of literary characters. By concentrating attention on the rich, pre-theoretical descriptions of first-personal experiences that literature makes possible, this methodology reduces the risk that introspective reports of the phenomenology of freedom will be overly influenced by the “theoretical commitments of the philosopher doing the introspection” (Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer & Turner 2004, 163).⁴ By giving voice to the experiences of characters from a variety of cultures, this methodology also helps to show that the yearning for spontaneous freedom is not culturally specific and to illustrate the different forms that it takes in different cultural settings.

⁴ In this way, the methodology of philosophy and literature addresses some of the same concerns that have motivated the development of the methodology of experimental philosophy (Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer & Turner 2004, 162-63). While literary examples provide opportunities to explore the phenomenology of freedom that are less shaded by philosophers' theoretical commitments, they also provide richer and more contextually embedded articulations of first-personal experiences of freedom than do experimental subjects' responses to survey questions. Experimental philosophers might complain that the selection of literary examples can still be manipulated by “philosophers with theoretical axes to grind” (Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer & Turner 2004, 163). However, the design of empirical studies of folk psychology can also embed such “theoretical axes,” asking subjects about some aspect of freedom rather than others. Attention to the phenomenology of literary cases can supplement the methods of experimental philosophy and is particularly useful when initially framing and describing a concept like spontaneous freedom which might later be studied more systematically.

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* provides a striking example of spontaneous freedom. Peter Walsh, who has been living in India, arrives in London to arrange a divorce for Daisy Simmons, his married lover who he plans to marry. Shortly after he arrives in London, Peter strolls through the city and, as he stands in Trafalgar Square, has a remarkable experience:

And just because nobody yet knew he was in London, except Clarissa, and the earth, after the voyage, still seemed an island to him, the strangeness of standing alone, alive, unknown, at half-past eleven in Trafalgar Square overcame him. What is it? Where am I? And why, after all, does one do it? he thought, the divorce seeming all moonshine. And down his mind went flat as a marsh, and three great emotions bowled over him; understanding; a vast philanthropy; and finally, as if the result of the others, an irrepressible, exquisite delight; as if inside his brain by another hand strings were pulled, shutters moved, and he, having nothing to do with it, yet stood at the opening of endless avenues, down which if he chose he might wander. He had not felt so young for years.

He had escaped! was utterly free — as happens in the downfall of habit when the mind, like an unguarded flame, bows and bends and seems about to blow from its holding. I haven't felt so young for years! thought Peter, escaping (only of course for an hour or so) from being precisely what he was, and feeling like a child who runs out of doors, and sees, as he runs, his old nurse waving at the wrong window (Woolf 2005, 51).

At the heart of Peter's experience of "utter freedom" is a sense of openness and possibility. There are "endless avenues" open before Peter; he feels that these avenues are not closed off even by his own history, desires, personality, and character, for he feels freed even "from being precisely what he was."

While Peter's experience of non-fixedness arises largely from his own introspective tendencies, the same sudden sense of openness can also be occasioned by external circumstances. An external shock might lead one to regard the future of one's life as more open than one had felt. In Akira Kurosawa's film, *Ikiru*, the protagonist, Watanabe, lives a monotonous, bureaucratic life in which he shows up every day to his job running a municipal agency that never does anything (Kurosawa 2010). When Watanabe discovers that he has

terminal stomach cancer, he is shocked into reevaluating his plans for his life, seeking out diverse new experiences, hunting out neighborhoods in Tokyo and social scenes that he has never previously encountered, and overhauling his sclerotic office. While in one respect Watanabe sees his future as more fixed—he knows that he will die of cancer before long—he sees the possibilities within his remaining life as vastly expanded.

The fact that an experience arises primarily from external circumstances does not preclude a character from embracing those external circumstances. In Saki's short story, "The Schartz-Metterklume Method," Lady Carlotta gets stranded at a small railway station when she misses her train (Saki 1996, 63-64). As Lady Carlotta sits at the station figuring out what to do, she is approached by "an imposingly attired lady" who says to her, "in a tone that admitted of very little argument," "You must be Miss Hope, the governess I've come to meet," to which Lady Carlotta says to herself, "Very well, if I must, I must" (Saki 1996, 64). With that, Lady Carlotta enthusiastically and humorously (but briefly) takes up the position of governess to two boys, much to the consternation of the boys' aristocratic parents. In taking up the role of governess, Lady Carlotta finds an opportunity for spontaneity in something that comes to her from the outside but that she does not see as forced upon her. Lady Carlotta does not take the imposingly attired lady's declaration as an imposition, instead treating the lady's "must" as a pun that solves her puzzle of what to do, having been stranded at a railway station. In contrast to Lady Carlotta, a traveller who got off the train already having decided to follow the first instructions that she received would not experience spontaneous freedom in following them, although she might have experienced it in making her earlier, whimsical decision to follow the first set of instructions to come along.

Lady Carlotta's lighthearted embrace of her unexpected circumstances is facilitated by material and social resources that allow her to play at being governess for a day without putting her livelihood or health at risk. But even those in much more precarious circumstances might cultivate the experience of spontaneous freedom as a strategy for dealing with anxiety about the future. For instance, in *A Free Man*, Aman Sethi tells the non-fictional story of Mohammad Ashraf, an impoverished day laborer living in northern India. Ashraf typically works for a few weeks or months at a time on dangerous construction projects, then takes his earnings (which he does not have a place to store, because he does not have a bank account) and spends them on food and alcohol until he runs out or all of his money gets stolen. Then, he finds work again, or perhaps hops on a train to a different city to look for work there. Ashraf has a highly developed sense of *azadi*, or freedom: he regards himself as "a free man" because he has no obligations to family or institutions, so he can pick up and leave wherever he is living at a moment's notice. At one point Ashraf tells Sethi, "Tomorrow I could well be in a train halfway across the country; the day after, I can return. This is a freedom that comes only from solitude" (Sethi 2011, 53). Ashraf finds a kind of satisfaction in his *azadi*, explaining to Sethi that he prefers to be a day laborer, rather than holding a permanent job, because he never has to answer to a boss for more than a day at a time (Sethi 2011, 20-21). Ashraf's experience of spontaneous freedom is developed and expressed strategically, in order to allow him to find a degree of pleasure in circumstances in which he is a victim of political oppression. This is not to suggest that oppression does not interfere with Ashraf's welfare, or that his poverty makes him free. Rather, Ashraf demonstrates that a yearning for spontaneous freedom is a widespread feature of the human experience, even in the face of severe poverty and oppression, not just something experienced by the wealthy when all of their other needs have already been met.

§ 3. The Structure of Spontaneous Freedom

Having described a range of manifestations of spontaneous freedom, I now develop a phenomenological account of the experience.⁵ In doing so, I abstract from the cases that I have presented to describe the generic structure of the experience of spontaneous freedom. I situate the experience relative to other cognate feelings, moods, and attitudes and then describe the typical content and circumstances of the experience, how the experience varies in different contexts, what resources are needed to have the experience and to enjoy rather than dread it, and why people intensely desire such experiences.

A phenomenological approach is attractive because it can help us to understand a form of freedom that is important to people's lived experiences. In constructing this phenomenological profile, I draw on Sigmund Freud's technique for studying feelings. At the outset of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud sets out to investigate the "oceanic feeling" of unity with all things that a religious friend had described to him, but which Freud himself had never experienced (Freud 2010, 24). How can we theorize a feeling that is "a purely subjective fact," Freud wonders. Freud suggests looking to "the ideational content which is most readily associated with the feeling," which is expressed by the language that we attach to the feeling in communicating about it (Freud 2010, 25). The "ideational content" is not identical to the feeling itself and does not fully exhaust what the feeling is. Freud's friend can use a phrase like "oneness with the universe" to describe the oceanic feeling, but such a description does not capture everything about the feeling. Instead, the ideational content evokes or

⁵ My phenomenological approach to freedom follows a recent turn toward phenomenology in the philosophy of free will (Pink 2009, § 2). However, other philosophers who study freedom phenomenologically are primarily concerned to describe experiences distinct from those of "free spirits," focusing instead, like normative ethicists interested in freedom, on experiences of deliberation and choice (Strawson 2010; Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer & Turner 2004).

characteristically accompanies experiencing the feeling, in the way that expressions like “free as a bird” or “footloose and fancy free” evoke the experience of spontaneous freedom.

In the phenomenological account of spontaneous freedom that I present here, I bracket considerations about the *veridicality* of the experience in order to focus on its *content* (cf. Smith & McIntyre 1982, 95-96). Like many experiences (the experience of falling in love; the experience of seeing a sequoia), the experience of spontaneous freedom may be more valuable when it is veridical (cf. Nozick 1974, 45). But to know when the veridicality conditions of the experience are satisfied, we first need an account of what those conditions are. Exploring the phenomenological contours and ideational content of the experience will both reveal the veridicality conditions of spontaneous freedom and illuminate the nature of the experience itself.

(i) *The experience of spontaneous freedom is part of a family of related experiences of openness.*

I begin my account by distinguishing experiences of spontaneous freedom from other similar phenomena. Like Freud’s oceanic feeling, the airy experience of spontaneous freedom is part of a collection of related experiences, moods, and attitudes. This family of experiences of openness encompasses (non-exhaustively) the experience of spontaneous freedom; experiences of relaxation and amusement; fun and excitement; feelings of relief at not having to do things that we want to avoid or at escaping obligations; feelings of refuge that we might find in privacy or remove from the world; the sense of a beginning when we set out on new projects or adventures; and the rush of creativity that we feel when we make artistic objects like paintings, poems, songs, or zines. This family of experiences also includes more negative experiences, such as experiences of fear or anxiety about the unknown and the mood of boredom or ennui when we are uncertain about what we should be interested in or care about.

Experiences in the family of openness have intentional content: they are *about* or *directed at* features of the self or the world, and this content is at least partially independent of the experiences' affective properties (Husserl 1960, 46). Experiences of openness involve the sense that what will happen in the world is not fixed in advance—even if it *is* fixed from some perspective, it does not *appear* fixed from the perspective of the person having the experience. Sometimes this sense of non-fixedness is purely negative, as when someone comes home from work, relieved not to be required to do anything else to earn their wages for the day; at other times it is more positive, as when one sets off on an adventure of indefinite duration.

The experience of spontaneous freedom is distinguished from experiences of relief and relaxation in being oriented toward the future. Relief and relaxation often involve the experience of freedom from a past or ongoing burden or duty, like the experience of someone whose children have gone to bed and who is relieved to be done with childcare for the day. Relief and relaxation are historical, in that they arise from a contrast between the state one presently inhabits and an earlier state, while experiencing spontaneous freedom need not involve any contrast between one's prior and current states. Spontaneous freedom is oriented toward the future, in that it concerns what will happen rather than what has happened.

The experience of spontaneous freedom is also distinguished from experiences of daydreaming and mind-wandering that form part of the family of experiences of openness, in that it is closely connected to proprioceptive experiences. The experience of spontaneous freedom involves an occurrent awareness of one's relationship to oneself and the world, which is connected, at least metaphorically, with sensations of uninhibited bodily movement through space. For instance, Peter describes his experience of freedom using spatial analogies (the images of the earth seeming "an island," of a mind bowing and bending, and of the child who

“runs out of doors”).⁶ To experience spontaneous freedom thus involves some awareness of oneself as an embodied being.

(ii) *The experience of spontaneous freedom involves feeling that our lives are not fixed in advance.*

Experiencing spontaneous freedom involves feeling that the course of one’s life is fully fixed neither by the external world nor by our own preexisting commitments and beliefs. This characteristic is common to Peter, who feels that endless avenues are open before him; Watanabe, whose plans and routines are thrown out of joint by his cancer; Ashraf, whose material position precludes him from making good predictions about how his life will go; and Lady Carlotta, who sees a claim made by someone else (“You must be the governess!”) as an opportunity for improvisation. If we think we already know the *exact* shape of our lives five years from now, we cannot experience spontaneous freedom about them.⁷ We might be content, we might look forward to good things that we anticipate will be part of our lives, and we might feel responsible for how things will go, but we cannot have the sensation of limitless avenues stretching out before us, down any of which we might travel. Experiencing spontaneous freedom requires a sense of mystery about what the future holds.⁸

The experience *as of* acting in a manner that has not been fixed in advance sets the experience of spontaneous freedom apart from the related experience of acting from habit.

⁶ This suggests that the experience of spontaneous freedom may be susceptible to empirical investigation by psychologists. For instance, Malcolm Westcott (1988) surveys the psychology of many different varieties of freedom, where freedom is understood as a personal experience or achievement.

⁷ All that is strictly required to experience spontaneous freedom is a horizon of future possibility that can be fixed in indefinitely many ways. Characters like Thelma and Louise can experience spontaneous freedom even when death is immanent as their car plunges off a cliff insofar as *some* horizon of possibility remains available to their subjective standpoints. Thanks to Ronald McIntyre for this point.

⁸ We may attain this sense of mystery without eliminating all of our future expectations. For instance, we might instead temporarily suspend our expectations for a few hours, as Peter seems to do. Such a temporary suspension need not involve altering our credences about what will happen but might simply require suspending our judgments that they will turn out this way or that (cf. Friedman 2017).

When I act habitually, my action can display a sort of freedom from deliberation: I get up in the morning and make coffee, going through the motions of grinding the beans and pouring the water without reflecting on or planning out my movements. In doing so, my action is not directly brought about by my conscious plans or intentions. Experiences of spontaneous freedom share with habitual action that they are not directly brought about by conscious plans or intentions.⁹ But, they have the further feature that the experience of spontaneous freedom involves positively experiencing my own action as not settled by my prior decisions. When I make coffee out of habit, I do not regard my activity as *unsettled* by my prior decisions—I simply do not think about the source of my action. Insofar as habit is traceable to the accretion of prior decisions, if I were to contemplate the the relationship between my coffee-making and my prior decisions, I would regard my habitual action as more or less settled by decisions that I made in the past, like my decisions to purchase a coffee grinder and a coffeemaker and to start drinking coffee in the first place. When Peter feels free, in contrast, he positively regards his action as *not* antecedently settled. While spontaneous freedom and habit both involve freedom from deliberation, only spontaneous freedom involves an experience *as of being free* from antecedent deliberative control of one's actions.¹⁰ While experiences of spontaneous freedom *need* only be non-habitual, they often go further and actively break with habit, for breaking

⁹ Experiences of spontaneous freedom cannot be had at will, because part of the phenomenology of spontaneous freedom is the occurrent experience our actions as unsettled. Spontaneously free activity can *accord with* conscious identities, plans, and decisions, but it cannot consciously be motivated by such features. This leaves open the possibility that, from a third-personal perspective, my action might appear to be settled by my background identities, personality traits, and motivations.

¹⁰ Unlike habitual action, virtuous action can give rise to experiences of spontaneous freedom. A benevolent person might spontaneously help out someone in need. The benevolent person's gift might appear predictable to a third-person observer who knows that the giver is benevolent. But the gift is set apart from my habitual coffee-making in that the benevolent person can actively regard their discretionary giving as *unfixed* by prior decisions. I owe this point to John Drummond.

with habit is one of the surest mechanisms by which we can confirm for ourselves that we have the power to act in unprecedented ways.¹¹

The feeling that one's action is unfixed by prior decisions can be disrupted both by features of the external world and by features of our own psychology. For instance, it would be odd or pathological for someone to feel that their activity was not fixed in advance if they were held down by ropes or glued to their chair. As Rogers Albritton notes, if I am stuck to my seat as the auditorium empties, saying, "Well, I'll just stay here in the balcony, then, that's what I'll do" isn't even an expression of *amor fati*. It's just fatuous" (Albritton 1985, 246). The external world is particularly likely to threaten the experience of spontaneous freedom when the source of constraint is other agents, rather than "nature" or "the universe": coercion and oppression by other people feel constrictive in ways that the natural world does not (Berlin 2002, 177). Pressure from other agents that precludes the experience of spontaneous freedom can take more subtle forms, too. Social expectations, subtle signals from friends, and so forth might be just as effective as glue at precluding a sense of openness.

Our own beliefs about our duties and commitments can also preclude the experience of spontaneous freedom, particularly when they become salient to our practical deliberation and when we feel conflict among them; believing ourselves relieved from duties that normally impinge upon us often occasions an experience of spontaneous freedom. Peter's experience of spontaneous freedom is enabled by his temporary detachment from duties and connections to

¹¹ Although spontaneous activity often breaks with habit, it is not merely random, for mere randomness does not reflect the complexity of particular persons, while spontaneous activity exhibits the actor's unique way of seeing the world. Spontaneous activity might, therefore, express what Nick Riggle calls "personal style": a way of living a life that expresses one's ideals (Riggle 2015, 729). The intrapersonal breaking out of habit through an experience of spontaneous freedom is analogous to Riggle's interpersonal ideal of the "awesome" person who creates social openings and breaks us out of well-worn patterns of social interaction (Riggle 2017). I am grateful to Eric Wiland for noticing this parallel.

other people: Clarissa is the only person who knows that Peter is in London. He does not have dinner obligations and is not yet expected to make and keep appointments with old friends. This detachment helps to make it possible for Peter to attend to “the strangeness of standing alone, alive, unknown, at half-past eleven in Trafalgar Square.” Standing alone, alive, unknown is *strange* for Peter because he cannot easily fit it into his existing understanding of the world, provoking him to reflect on his life in an ironic mood, shaking himself out of his habitual ways of thinking and living: “What is it? Where am I? And why, after all, does one do it?”¹²

Just as the experience can be *precluded* by internal or external circumstances, it can also be *occasioned* by either internal or external occurrences. We might come to develop new understandings of who we are, what our plans are, and what our futures hold just by reflecting on the concepts we already have, critically examining them, and exploring their relationship to one another. We might accomplish this, for instance, by meditation or prayer. The sense of non-fixedness can also be occasioned by external circumstances. As with Watanabe, external shocks might lead us to see the futures of our lives as less fixed than we previously had felt. Or we might feel that our futures are opened up by conversations that lead us to doubt our existing plans, and we might enter into relationships with other people that lead us down avenues that we did not, by ourselves, know how to traverse (cf. Dover n.d.).

At the same time, a sufficiently resistant psychology might prevent a person from experiencing a sense of non-fixedness no matter how great the external shocks that they encounter. In Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Captain Ahab seeks out the White Whale with

¹² It is not only our beliefs about particular obligations that restrict how we can act but also more general commitments that we hold. For instance, subscribing to a directive view of morality that required that we follow a single course of action to promote the good might leave us with no “breathing room” to feel that the future of our lives was not fixed (Shiffrin 1991, 249). The specificity of such requirements matters to whether we feel “held down” by them.

such a deep singleness of purpose that no amount of bad omens, shipboard surprises, and conversations with other sailors can dissuade him from his monomania (Melville 1981, 187-92). While other sailors on his ship find adventure and new vistas in a whaling cruise, Ahab is incapable of entertaining doubts about what his future holds. Experiencing spontaneous freedom thus requires the right combination of internal and external constraints and impetuses to produce a sense of non-fixedness. Maria Kronfeldner argues that creativity requires partial freedom from the influences of the external world, including from other people, as well as partial freedom “from the influence of previous knowledge, and from the routine methods, rules and plans based on this knowledge” (Kronfeldner 2009, 591). Similarly, experiences of spontaneous freedom require both external freedom—the sense that what will happen with our lives in the future is not fixed by other people—and internal freedom—the sense that what will happen with our lives is not fixed by features of ourselves, including plans, intentions, or previously made decisions that are transparently available to our conscious reflection.

(iii) The experience of spontaneous freedom involves an attitude of voluntariness.

Experiencing spontaneous freedom also involves a sense of voluntariness concerning the activity that occasions the experience. When Peter’s mind goes down “flat as a marsh” he feels temporarily detached from the reason he had to come to London, which was to secure the divorce. At that moment, the divorce seems “all moonshine,” and Peter stands in Trafalgar Square with no overriding obligations, his mind seeming “about to blow from its holding.”

When we experience ourselves as spontaneously free, we feel that what we are doing is optional, rather than required by some further end. What matters in this respect is whether we *regard* what we will do as required, rather than whether it *really is* required. The pursuit of any activity out of duty precludes a sense of optionality about that particular activity insofar as the

obligation dictates the activity of the agent. For someone who is committed to hosting good parties and takes part of hosting good parties to be reducing allergens before guests arrive, vacuuming up the cat hair in the apartment will not appear *optional* because that person undertakes it in furtherance of a commitment to parties. To the extent that someone can regard pre-party vacuuming as optional, it must be because some features of the activity are not required by the obligation to which the vacuuming is attached (perhaps they can dance while vacuuming without compromising the projects with which it is connected, although then it would be the dancing, not the vacuuming, that was optional) or because a derivative sense of optionality comes from regarding their commitment to throwing parties itself as optional.¹³

This sense of voluntariness requires something stronger than not regarding some activity as obligatory. Merely not regarding what we do as obligatory might suffice for the related experiences of relief or refuge, but not for the feeling that Peter has when his afternoon in London lies completely open. To have the full-fledged experience of spontaneous freedom, we must positively be aware that our activities are *not* obligatory, though we need not explicitly represent the feeling as one of voluntariness or freedom.

(iv) The experience of spontaneous freedom is not an experience of anxiety or fear of the unknown, nor is it equivalent to an experience of choice.

As the case of Lady Carlotta illustrates, embracing an experience of spontaneous freedom requires the absence of fear and helplessness, but does not require explicit, conscious endorsement of what happens in one's life. It can instead be a matter of how we respond to unplanned and unforeseen circumstances that provoke new ways of thinking about our lives.

¹³ One can voluntarily adopt constraints on one's actions while still having a derivative experience of optionality. For instance, when I play a game, I accept rules that obligate me to act in certain ways, but, at the same time, the voluntariness of the game can "frame" my rule-governed decisions so that I have an experience of freedom in playing the game (Gingerich 2018, 835-37). Such derivative experiences of spontaneous freedom are grounded by my underlying experience of play as fully voluntary.

Part of the experience of spontaneous freedom might be feeling that we have a choice about which of the avenues open before us we will travel. But we might also have a positive experience of spontaneous freedom by seeing our futures as settled largely by chance or the natural environment that we inhabit. The experience of the changes to one's body arising from an unplanned pregnancy illustrates the contrast between circumstances that can occasion spontaneous freedom and those that simply give rise to alienation: the bodily changes arising from an unwanted pregnancy may be alienating, while an unplanned yet welcomed pregnancy may lead to bodily changes being experienced as exciting or intriguing (Lundquist 2008).

One way that we might experience spontaneous freedom without fear or anxiety is by “appropriating” sources of activity other than our deliberative, planning capacities to ourselves, where the contrast to “appropriating” is fearing, feeling anxious, or resisting the external impulse or motivation.¹⁴ Like an alternate version of Lady Carlotta who had made up her mind in advance to try and become a governess before she got off her train, when we act because of commitments that we have consciously endorsed, we experience our actions as settled in advance. The alternative to acting on the basis of reflectively endorsed plans is to act on the basis of some impulse or motivation that we have not reflected on and endorsed but that—in order to have the full experience of spontaneous freedom—we nevertheless regard as our own.

Peter's sensation of exquisite delight also distinguishes the experience of spontaneous freedom from one of choice. Peter feels that his future lies open before him, such that he could wander down any of innumerable avenues *if he so chose*. But this feeling of openness is not,

¹⁴ Appropriation as I conceive it here is thus unlike Harry Frankfurt's notion of identification, in that, unlike identification, appropriation need not involve any *decision* to appropriate something (Frankfurt 1988, 168). My notion of appropriation is closer to Rahel Jaeggi's conception of appropriation, which involves “having access to or command over oneself in the world” where the form of command that one has over oneself is understood in the sense of having command of a language (Jaeggi 2014, 37).

itself, the product of Peter's choice or something he could experience at will, and you can have all of the freedom of choice that you want without being a free spirit. It is as if "by another hand" strings were pulled inside Peter and "he, having nothing to do with it" stood before endless avenues. Peter's escape could result indirectly from a choice to make himself into the sort of person who is receptive to the strangeness of the world, but it could not be produced directly by a choice to be utterly free. In contrast to the experience of choice, Peter's experience of freedom involves feeling that he encompasses more than his conscious, deliberative nature.

I have argued that the experience of spontaneous freedom is part of a family of related experiences of openness, but it is set apart from other such experiences in that it is connected with experiences of free bodily movement, it is oriented toward the future, it involves an attitude of voluntariness, and it is not an experience of anxiety or fear. I will now describe how, and in what contexts, people value and seek experiences of spontaneous freedom.

(v) People often value and seek experiences of spontaneous freedom.

People seek experiences of spontaneous freedom for a variety of reasons, including to avoid monotony and boredom and to find excitement, as when Lady Carlotta confounds the boredom of the train station by whimsically accepting the pronouncement that she must be the new governess. People value and seek some varieties of spontaneous freedom more than others. We might have a tepid experience of spontaneous freedom in surveying the endless avenues of breakfast cereals that lie open to us, but, unless we are inane, the experiences of spontaneous freedom that we have when we make art or converse with friends will shine more brightly than the freedom of the supermarket.¹⁵

¹⁵ Experiences of consumer choice might not qualify as veridical experiences of spontaneous freedom at all, because even when my decision to buy Cheerios is not settled in advance by introspectively transparent features of my own psychology it might be more or less settled in advance by the decisions of other agents (like marketers, grocery store owners, or bureaucrats) (Gingerich n.d.).

One reason that people seek experiences of spontaneous freedom is that such experiences can provide a feeling of relief at finding ourselves not to be exhausted by our rational, deliberative natures. When I experience spontaneous freedom, I am freed from experiencing my action as the product of my prior choices, and I can experience this freedom as a sort of relief from being caught up in the activities of planning, reasoning, and deliberating. When Peter escapes “from being precisely what he was,” he can “go with the flow” for a few minutes or a few hours, rather than thinking through every action he takes. This sort of relief can be occasioned by the freedom from deliberation characteristic of both experiences of habitual action and experiences of spontaneous freedom, for both sorts of experiences enable me to identify the source of my action with “nature” or with deep and unstructured commitments, rather than with my deliberative and introspectively transparent plans. Such identification can lead me to see myself less as an individual rational agent as more as continuous with nature and other people, partially relieving the existential anxiety that can come from seeing my individual life as a tiny part of an indifferent universe (Nagel 1979, 15).

People seek experiences of spontaneous freedom not only as a relief from the exercise of deliberative control but also because these experiences realize “the capacity of beginning something anew” (Arendt 1998, 9). We exercise this power to originate when we do things that do not simply execute previously made decisions. The experience of spontaneous freedom is part of what it is for us to see ourselves as sources of novelty, for feeling that our decisions and activities were all planned in advance would frustrate our ability to experience ourselves as creative or original. When opportunities for spontaneous freedom are severely restricted, the human disposition to exercise the power of originality can take on contorted or even destructive forms, causing us to act out like bored teenagers in a strict disciplinarian school.

While experiencing spontaneous freedom at every moment of one's life would be unsustainable, and perhaps inconsistent with being an agent at all, experiencing it at least sometimes is necessary to fully exercise a power that may be as deeply important to being human as is the capacity for rational deliberation.

Realizing the power of originality in experiences of spontaneous freedom is also necessary for a certain sort of creativity to flourish. While artistic creativity can take many different forms and can have a wide array of motivations, one paradigmatic and important form of creativity is the creativity of "genius" that Kant regarded as necessary for the production of beautiful art (Kant 2000, 5:307). For Kant, artistic genius requires creating in a manner that is unprecedented in conceptual thought and that is "entirely opposed to the spirit of imitation" (Kant 2000, 5:307-08). Such creation involves an experience of spontaneous freedom, because in order to create unprecedented art, I must take myself not to be merely following a plan, which is the central feature of spontaneous freedom.¹⁶

Spontaneous freedom is thus valued because it can provide relief from the anxiety that we are merely our rational natures, it can exercise a valuable psychological capacity for originality, and it allows for the creation of a paradigmatic and important variety of art.

(vi) The experience of spontaneous freedom comes in varying intensities, can have a broader or narrower scope, and is associated with a range of different affects.

The experience of spontaneous freedom varies in scope and intensity. At some moments in our lives, we might have experiences of freedom so profound that vastly different paths

¹⁶ The connection of spontaneous freedom to artistic creativity elucidates the further value of veridical experiences of spontaneous freedom beyond merely subjective experiences of it. Consider a poet who was manipulated from the time of their conception by a powerful scientist who controlled their entire character, personality, and motivational system to bring it about that they would write the exact poem that they wrote. Such a poet would fail to author a "genius" poem (in Kant's sense), and would not *veridically* experience spontaneous freedom, although they might subjectively experience spontaneous freedom if they never learned of the scientist's plan to control them (Barnes 2015, 572).

stretch out in front of us heading in radically different directions, all of which appear to us now as equally eligible and likely. Someone might feel that they could just go off and live in the woods for a few years on a whim or they could settle down and start a family. They might have this feeling less intensely at other moments in their life, for instance, when they have already set off on an adventure or project and, while they can entertain the idea of going off and living in the woods for a few years on a whim, it does not seem likely or practically possible for them in the moment. Similarly, the experience of spontaneous freedom can have a broader or narrower scope. We can experience a sense of freedom with respect to a broader or more diverse set of alternatives (What should I do with my summer? How will I organize my political life and live together with other people? What aesthetic projects will I pursue in the coming decade?) or from within a narrowly circumscribed collection of paths until the experience dwindles down to nothing, or nothing of value (Will I become a lawyer or an accountant? At the fork in the trail, will I go up the ridge or down the canyon? Will I have a beer or a glass of wine? Will I pay with Visa or Mastercard?). The richness or impoverishment of the horizon of possibilities associated with an experience of spontaneous freedom is much of what makes some experiences of spontaneous freedom more valuable and others less so.

Spontaneous freedom is also associated with a range of affects. It is often associated with positive affective states, like Peter's exquisite delight. But there are also instances of the experience of spontaneous freedom as solemn or vertiginous. We might think of Jean-Paul Sartre's case of a young man in the Second World War deciding whether to stay home with his bereaved mother or to go to England to join the Free French Forces (Sartre 2007, 30-31). The young man might experience spontaneous freedom in feeling that it is not settled how his life will go and regarding what he will do as discretionary (if he sees his obligations to his mother

and to the resistance as incommensurable and equally weighty), yet still feel that his choice is an anguished one.

Spontaneous freedom might also be disconcerting if it is occasioned by activities that strain our ethical and political commitments or that provoke us to reflect on values to which our self-image is tied. Some figure like Gauguin might experience spontaneous freedom when he abandons his family and heads to Tahiti for the sake of his art but might at the same time feel conflict between his artistic practice and commitments to his family that still tug at him (Williams 1981, 22-23). For others, obligations like a lunch appointment or needing to pick the kids up from school might keep one from feeling spontaneously free. The case of Gauguin emphasizes that spontaneous freedom is not a moralized concept and that to experience spontaneous freedom in the wrong setting or to too great a degree can violate the requirements of interpersonal morality. The case also suggests that low-stakes settings, in which the risk that our actions will harm other people is low, provide some of the best (or least morally fraught) environments in which to experience spontaneous freedom.

(vii) Material, social, and psychological resources are required both to experience spontaneous freedom and to value and take pleasure in it.

The affective states associated with experiences of spontaneous freedom vary not only with the nature of the activity that one is engaged in—whether one faces deep existential choices or an unstructured afternoon in London—but also with the background resources at one’s disposal. Just as certain material resources must be in place for agents to achieve the freedom of deliberative autonomy, so too certain material, social, and psychological resources are required both to have the experience of spontaneous freedom at all and to experience it as an occasion for delight. Peter, for instance, has a background awareness as he stands in Trafalgar Square that his resources will enable him to move on from an experience of complete

escape to other experiences of greater connectedness. He has money, has lived in London, knows how to read and interpret the signs, events, and people that he encounters in the city, has some free time, and has friends who he can track down after a few hours. These resources enable Peter to experience his freedom joyfully rather than fearfully, as we might expect if Peter were plopped down in the heart of an unknown city with no resources or connections or if he found himself adrift at sea. Peter's resources also suggest that there is some sense in which the limitlessness of possibility that he experiences while standing in Trafalgar Square is an illusion. It might seem to Peter that he can wander down any avenue he chooses, but from the reader's perspective it seems likely that he will end up filing Daisy's divorce papers, seeing some old friends, and eventually heading back to India. But this external perspective about Peter's objectively probable course of action does not make Peter's *experience* of freedom less significant for him in the moment that he feels like a child, running out of doors.

The case of Ashraf who, even in dire poverty, strategically shapes his life to find moments of *azadi*, suggests that spontaneous freedom can, at times, be found even in terrible political and material circumstances, although Ashraf might experience only the pleasure of feeling that he outstrips his rational nature, rather than the pleasure of actively creating. Ashraf's case shares with the cases of Peter, Lady Carlotta, and Watanabe that, in some sense, he has "nothing to lose." Ashraf has nothing to lose because he does not have anything to begin with, Watanabe because he already knows that he will die soon, and Peter and Lady Carlotta because they are sufficiently well-off that a few days of spontaneity are unlikely to negatively affect their long-term well being. However, experiences of spontaneous freedom are typically more robust, expansive, and joyous for characters like Peter and Lady Carlotta than for those like Ashraf whose experience of spontaneous freedom is narrowed by impoverishment.

(viii) Access to the experience of spontaneous freedom is a political problem.

As individuals cannot experience spontaneous freedom at will, states cannot directly cause their subjects to have the experience, and it seems impossible that people could be “forced to be” spontaneously free (Rousseau 2002, 166). However, because experiencing spontaneous freedom requires social and material resources, spontaneous freedom is a political issue, and the political arrangements of social life can enhance or inhibit access to the experience of spontaneous freedom, even if they cannot directly cause it. Ashraf’s case suggests that the state might nurture experiences of spontaneous freedom by meeting citizens’ material needs, whether through robust welfare protections, a universal basic income, or other means, so that more people could experience spontaneous freedom in the joyous and expansive manner that is available to Peter. Experiences of spontaneous freedom might also be enabled by governments or private institutions that guarantee employees’ access to vacation time and holidays that allow for a suspension of ordinary routines. All of these provisions would make it easier for people to feel that they have “nothing to lose” in pursuing experiences of spontaneous freedom by reducing the risks of, for example, taking a week-long road trip.¹⁷

It is not merely material deprivation and political inequality that can undermine the experience of spontaneous freedom but also racism, sexism, and ideology. For instance, none of the literary characters whose experiences I have described have children to take care of. Peter can pop over to London from India for a few weeks and spend a chunk of time wandering the city, with no obligations. Daisy Simmons, who Peter plans to marry, likely could not do the same: she has two young children to care for (Woolf 2005, 44). Daisy’s circumstances indicate the dependence of experiences of spontaneity and the possibility of valuing them on political

¹⁷ Many or all of the political conditions that would allow for widespread experiences of spontaneous freedom are likely also required for the effective exercise of autonomous choice (Love 2018).

and social circumstances. In the contemporary world, most people find themselves in circumstances closer to Daisy's than to Peter's: between work and caring responsibilities, few people can experience spontaneous freedom for more than a few hours at a time, if at all. To make matters worse, sexism and racism often prevent people from experiencing spontaneous freedom in objectively low-stakes situations that should provide opportunities for spontaneity, such as when the threat of sexual harassment restricts women's spontaneity in choosing what sort of outfit to wear to a party (Kennedy 1992).¹⁸ In addition to better provision for material needs, more substantial and equitable access to experiences of spontaneous freedom may require widespread social support for childcare, so that parents' spontaneity need not come at the cost of harm to their children, resistance to gendered double standards that celebrate spontaneity in men rather than women, and the dismantling of systems of oppression that prevent people from experiencing spontaneous freedom in low-stakes settings.

While gender oppression leads to unequal access to spontaneous freedom, spontaneous freedom can also interrupt and undermine gender oppression. For instance, in Audre Lorde's view, the erotic—which, like spontaneous freedom, is “a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings” that “cannot be felt secondhand”—is suppressed by the “male world” but also provides “a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation” and “can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world” (Lorde 1984, 54-59). Lorde's erotic involves experiencing one's activity as arising from a non-introspectively transparent, non-reflectively endorsed source. The erotic can be counter-ideological, just as experiences of spontaneous freedom can be counter-habitual: the spontaneity of the erotic destabilizes the ideologies of sex oppression and

¹⁸ I am grateful to Hallie Liberto for raising this point.

racial oppression because the unmediated feeling of the erotic refuses to follow the predictable scripts laid down by the white patriarchal tradition, which restricts experiences of the erotic to formulaic sexual rituals. For Lorde, the erotic charge comes in part from the unpredictability of the “chaos of our strongest feelings.” Celebrating Lorde’s erotic can thus nourish resistance to oppression, and insofar as something like the erotic is an instance of spontaneous freedom, experiences of spontaneous freedom can undermine architectures of oppression.

I have argued that the experience of spontaneous freedom is an experience of regarding our activities as arising from ourselves but also as not fixed in advance, whether by our own consciously-endorsed plans or prior decisions or those of other agents. Such experiences are marked both by an attitude of voluntariness and by the appropriation of one’s activity to oneself. People seek experiences of this sort, because they unburden us from the feeling that we are precisely who we are, give us a sense of our own powers of originality, and allow for a paradigmatic sort of artistic creativity. While seeking experiences of spontaneous freedom is a near universal feature of human life, people are typically better able to attain and value them when they have sufficient social, material, and psychological resources at their disposal. As I will argue in the following section, appreciating the value of spontaneous freedom and its socio-political character provides insight into perennial philosophical debates about free will.

§ 4. Spontaneous Freedom and Free Will

For many philosophers, the problem of free will is all about moral responsibility: in what way must we be free in order for our actions to count as ours, or for our practices of blaming, praising, punishing, and rewarding to be justified? However, a significant minority of incompatibilists reject compatibilism on the grounds that true freedom requires the ability to

create by “bring[ing] forth something that is not implicit in the past” (Anglin 1990, 14). The incompatibilist demand for creativity maintains that compatibilist freedom lacks the sparkle of freshness and originality that true freedom should exhibit (Barrett 1958, 31; Kane 1999, 81). For many libertarian incompatibilists, the freedom to create in a way that allows one to originate genuinely new values is a sort of freedom worth wanting (Clarke 2003, 111-13).

Compatibilists often reject libertarianism about free will on the grounds that it is not scientifically plausible or that it requires naturalistically implausible metaphysical commitments (Vargas 2004, 409; Nichols 2012). In the view of compatibilists, a naturalistically plausible form of creativity is all the creativity that we could want free will to deliver to us. Eric Christian Barnes, for instance, contends that creativity is undermined when agents are “under the powerful control of other agents (rather than under the influence of brute forces of nature)” and so are “doomed to act and think only in ways that other agents can imagine” (Barnes 2015, 583). On Barnes’s view, the value of creativity and originality gives us reason to want freedom from manipulation by other agents, but not to want freedom from laws of nature or the causal order of events. In this section, I will argue that the phenomenology of spontaneous freedom bolsters the compatibilist case but also accommodates much of the incompatibilist concern with creativity: what libertarian incompatibilists concerned with creativity really want is spontaneous freedom, but the veridical experience of spontaneous freedom is perfectly compatible with determinism.

The desire for freshness and creativity that motivates the incompatibilist is, in significant part, a desire for the values that experiences of spontaneous freedom offer. The appeal of spontaneous freedom comes from its making our lives more open than they would be in the absence of spontaneity. Such openness provides a distinctive pleasure of freedom from

constraint for those who experience it, whether once in a while or regularly over the course of their lives. Experiences of spontaneous freedom allow us to feel that we are sources of novelty and freshness; to rejoice in the fact that we encompass more depth than our conscious, reflective natures contain; and to trust that we can draw upon that depth while remaining, in some sense, ourselves. Such experiences of spontaneous freedom should appeal to libertarian incompatibilists who worry about a “stale and routine world from which surprise and genuine novelty may ultimately be banished” (Barrett 1958, 32).

The experience of spontaneous freedom more fully satisfies the libertarian desire for freshness and originality than does the compatibilist freedom from manipulation that Barnes’s account of creativity offers, because veridical experiences of spontaneous freedom require an agent’s activity to be free not only “from something like the psychological or cultural forces that block independent and novel thought” (Barnes 2015, 566) but also from the control of the agent’s own prior decisions. This further condition for spontaneous freedom helps to satisfy the libertarian’s sense that free agents must not be “stifle[d] with boredom” (Barrett 1958, 31).

However, because experiences of spontaneous freedom involve feeling that our activity is uncaused by any human cause, or any agential cause, we could experience our activity as caused by the natural world and its laws but nonetheless veridically experience our activity as spontaneously free. It is largely because experiences of spontaneous freedom make such a feeling of freshness and novelty possible that they are valuable. The phenomenology of spontaneous freedom therefore appears to undermine the incompatibilist claim that the truth of determinism would prevent us from experiencing a sort of creativity for which we yearn.

Libertarian partisans of creativity might worry that the experience of spontaneous freedom does not provide all of the creativity that we might reasonably want, because *genuine*

novelty requires that agents have the ability to “add value” to the world not just as a vehicle through which nature operates but as originators of value whose actions introduce value into the world that “was not presaged by or already fully counted” in the world’s previous instrumental value (Nozick 1983, 311). The libertarian might object, “Because the experience of spontaneous freedom is *merely* an experience of acting in a way that is not settled in advance by plans, whether one’s own or another agent’s, the experience of spontaneous freedom is only a partial experience of novelty. To experience *real* novelty, I must experience my action as not settled in advance not just by plans but by *anything*, including events and laws of nature.”

The libertarian’s claim that the experience of spontaneous freedom lacks something that the experience of incompatibilist freedom provides is difficult to make sense of from a first-personal perspective. As far as the phenomenology of freedom is concerned, the truth or falsity of determinism does not seem to matter to whether I experience my activity as creative or spontaneously free. For instance, learning that determinism is true would not undermine Peter Walsh’s experience of freedom nearly as much as would a lunch appointment that required him to hurry off rather than dallying in Trafalgar Square. The truth or falsity of a metaphysical thesis is not the sort of consideration that differentiates experiences of creativity from those of boredom, or that differentiates a novel and innovative poem from a derivative one. This point is analogous to Peter Strawson’s argument that the truth or falsity of determinism is not the sort of consideration that could justify or undermine our everyday practices of praising and blaming (Strawson 2008, 1-28). My account of the phenomenology of spontaneous freedom thus supports the compatibilist’s rejection of the incompatibilist’s argument that determinism would need to be false in order for us to experience genuine creativity in the same way that Strawson’s account of the reactive attitudes supports the

compatibilist's rejection of the incompatibilist's claim that determinism precludes genuine moral responsibility. The values associated with originality, insofar as they matter for decisions that we make about how to live our lives, are fully realized in our everyday creative practices.

The libertarian incompatibilist might yet contend that creativity that expresses the power of underived origination is of greater *objective* worth than is creativity that fails to do so, even if the presence or absence of this power makes no difference to the first-personal experience (Kane 1999, 97-98). While this avenue is open to the libertarian, it prevents the libertarian from appealing to the phenomenology of freedom in support of the claim that the concept of free will must include a power of underived origination. This is a significant cost, because many incompatibilists see such appeals to phenomenology as the best means of making progress on the intractable dispute with compatibilism (Caruso 2012, 75; Caruso 2015, 2829; Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer & Turner 2004, 165-69).¹⁹

While the phenomenology of spontaneous freedom undermines libertarian incompatibilism by showing that much of the value of originality that the libertarian demands can be achieved without abandoning a compatibilist metaphysics, it also suggests that the truth of compatibilism is not sufficient to ensure that the freedom of creativity is available to us. Our political decisions cannot affect the truth or falsity of determinism or compatibilism, but they can affect how often and intensely people experience spontaneous freedom. For people to access the sorts of creativity and originality that libertarian incompatibilists rightly value, we must secure the social conditions that enable widespread experiences of spontaneous freedom.

¹⁹ Religious libertarians can more easily appeal to the phenomenology of spontaneous freedom to support their views. For an experience of spontaneous freedom to be veridical, one's activity must not in fact be settled in advance by the decisions of another agent. If God is an agent, one's activity must not be settled in advance by God, if one is to veridically experience spontaneous freedom (cf. Anglin 1990). Such a theistic approach is not, however, interested in generating a naturalistically plausible account of free will.

Some free will theorists might object to injecting the phenomenology of spontaneous freedom into the free will debate on the ground that “the primary conceptual role of free will ... is its role in attributions of responsibility” (Vargas 2004, 418). Indeed, many experimental philosophers who have studied free will, including both compatibilists and incompatibilists, conflate the concepts of moral responsibility and free will into a single variable in their empirical studies (Nichols & Knobe 2007, 670; Murray & Nahmias 2014, 44).²⁰ However, free will theorists typically accept the importance of understanding the folk conception of free will, at least insofar as the free will debate relies on claims about our intuitions (Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer & Turner 2006, 30; Murray & Nahmias 2014, 435; Shepherd 2017, § 1). My phenomenological account has shown that spontaneous freedom is one aspect of the folk understanding of freedom. This does not entail that the primary role of the concept of free will is not to explain attributions of moral responsibility, but it does recommend that we adopt a more pluralist understanding of freedom, recognizing, like Manuel Vargas, that there is not a

²⁰ Because most experimental studies of free will have focused on whether “the folk” have compatibilist or incompatibilist intuitions about moral responsibility, divergences in folk understandings of moral responsibility and free will have been subjected to little empirical study. One experimental study found that subjects are more likely to describe characters in vignettes designed to elicit intuitions about compatibilism and incompatibilism as being morally responsible than as having free will, (Nahmias, Coates & Kvaran 2007, 238). Nahmias, Coates, and Kvaran tentatively suggest that the higher level of judgements about moral responsibility compared to free will might result from subjects conflating the concept of moral responsibility with the concept of desert, which might be justified on grounds of deterrence (Nahmias, Coates & Kvaran 2007, 239). Another recent study found that manipulating research subjects’ belief in free will does not affect their evaluations of immoral behavior, while manipulating their beliefs about an agent’s choice capacity does (Monroe, Brady & Malle 2017, 191). Monroe, Brady, and Malle suggest that “free will is a shorthand that people use for ascribing choice and lack of constraints” and that once the concept of free will is “unpacked” into its “psychological constituents,” it has little role to play in explaining moral judgments (Monroe, Brady & Malle 2017, 198). My account of spontaneous freedom suggests another possibility not considered by recent experimental studies of free will: “the folk” may be more willing to make attributions of moral responsibility than attributions of free will because they regard the full realization of free will as including the experience of spontaneous freedom, which requires something beyond what is required to be morally responsible for one’s actions. Studying how experiences of creativity and spontaneity fit into folk understandings of free will may be a fruitful avenue for experimental philosophers to pursue in order to gain a fuller understanding of how folk conceptions of free will and moral responsibility diverge from one another.

single problem of free will, but a cluster of related problems, one of which involves concerns about creativity and originality (Vargas 2009, 58-59). The phenomenology of spontaneous freedom can help to make progress on *this* problem of free will, even if it cannot help with the question of whether we are ultimately morally responsible for our actions.

§ 5. Conclusion

I have identified an experience of openness to possibility that many people have at one point or another in their lives, that others seek, and that is often described using the vocabulary of freedom in our ordinary language. I have developed a phenomenological profile of this experience of spontaneous freedom and argued that this experience centrally involves regarding one's activity as not fixed in advance either by other people's plans or decisions or by one's own. Many people are willing to renovate their lives, going to great lengths for a brief taste of spontaneity. Recognizing the value of spontaneous freedom should lead us to organize our social life to ensure that experiences of spontaneous freedom are not restricted to the privileged. It also suggests that one aspect of the philosophical debate about free will ultimately hinges on a social and political problem, rather than a metaphysical one. Moral theory should acknowledge the yearning that many of us have for spontaneous freedom in order to do full justice to the human aspiration for freedom.²¹

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