

# SPONTANEOUS FREEDOM

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**Abstract.** Spontaneous freedom, the freedom of unplanned and unscripted activity enjoyed by ‘free spirits’, is central to everyday talk about ‘freedom’. Yet the freedom of spontaneity is absent from contemporary moral philosophers’ theories of freedom, which are largely concerned to identify the sort of freedom that is required for moral responsibility, or for political legitimacy. This essay begins to remedy the philosophical neglect of spontaneous freedom. I offer an account of the nature of spontaneous freedom and make a case for its value. I go on to show how an understanding of spontaneous freedom clarifies the free will debate by helping to make sense of the libertarian claim that compatibilist varieties of freedom do not allow for genuine novelty and creativity.

## §1. Introduction

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 ‘free spirits’, ‘the freedom of the open road’, and ‘free as a bird’. It is evoked by Walt Whitman when he writes, ‘Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road, / Healthy, free, the world before me’ (Whitman 1881, 120); by Joni Mitchell when she sings, ‘We love our lovin’ / But not like we love our freedom’ (Mitchell 1974); and by Philip Larkin when he speaks of ‘free bloody birds’ going ‘down the long slide / To happiness, endlessly’ (Larkin 2004, 129). This feeling is associated with the idea that one’s life could go in many different directions, that there is a vast range of things that one could do or become. It arises in concert with a wide range of human practices and experiences, including 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 largely overlooked in discussions of freedom in contemporary moral philosophy. Instead, moral philosophers typically focus either on the

sort of freedom that is a prerequisite for moral responsibility, or on the sort of freedom that is required for a state to be legitimate.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I begin to remedy the philosophical neglect of spontaneous freedom, characterising its nature and making a case for its value. In §§2-3, I suggest that we experience spontaneous freedom when we experience our activities as arising out of ourselves, but not as planned, scripted, or deliberately settled in advance. In contrast to thoroughly moralised portrayals of freedom such as Kant's, my account of spontaneous freedom allows that, in certain circumstances, spontaneous freedom may be morally dangerous or otherwise undesirable. I argue in §4 that it is nonetheless a form of freedom worth wanting. While spontaneous freedom has historically been a perquisite of social and economic elites, it is a sort of freedom for which many people justifiably yearn.

Finally, I show how attending to spontaneous freedom can inform the free will debate. Many libertarian incompatibilists—those who believe that we have free will, and that free will is incompatible with determinism—think that compatibilist varieties of freedom lack the sparkle of 'freshness, novelty, [and] genuine creation' that true freedom would afford (Barrett 1958, 31). In §5, however, I contend that spontaneous freedom can provide all the freshness and novelty that we want without requiring any commitment to incompatibilist metaphysics. Spontaneous freedom raises a political problem, not a metaphysical one; we need collective action, not metaphysical indeterminism, to secure it.

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<sup>1</sup> Some moral philosophers regard freedom as a matter of the internal configuration of a person's mind or attitudes (Frankfurt 1988a; Korsgaard 1996). Others regard it as a relationship among people, consisting in the absence of social or political domination (Cudd 2012; Pettit 1996), or the provision of sufficient resources for individuals to exercise choice effectively (Feinberg 1971; Dworkin 1972; Raz 1986). Still others regard it as a relationship between a person and the world: a matter of whether we have the power to cause events (Sartorio 2012) or to control our actions (Fischer 2012). Exceptions to the neglect of the freedom of unscriptedness in moral philosophy include work on freedom as an 'ethical ideal' (see Geuss 1995) and as a measure of uncertainty about the future (see Garnett 2013; Suppes 1995).

Before I begin, let me head off a potentially distracting objection. Some readers might be reluctant to regard spontaneous freedom as a sort of *freedom*. If one's aim in theorising about freedom is to explain and justify moral responsibility and vindicate our practices of blame and punishment—or, for that matter, to explain away the appearance of moral responsibility and delegitimise those practices—then one will be drawn to a conception of freedom that is centrally, or even constitutively, concerned with morality. By contrast, my approach seeks to understand what people *feel* when they feel free and what people *want* when they want freedom. In other words, it seeks to understand the familiar feelings and desires evoked by the poems and pop lyrics quoted above. I have nothing to say against theories of freedom focused on moral responsibility or the metaphysics of causation. Indeed, everything I say below is, strictly speaking, compatible with all the theories of freedom that I will discuss. I presuppose here a pluralistic approach to the philosophy of freedom: there is not a single problem of free will but a cluster of related problems (see Vargas 2009), one of which concerns the possibility of genuine spontaneity.

## **§2. Spontaneous freedom**

Spontaneous freedom is the freedom we experience when we feel 'free as a bird'. How can we approach such an amorphous and subjective phenomenon philosophically? Freud faced a similar quandary when a religious friend suggested he investigate the 'oceanic feeling' of unity with all things (Freud 2010, 24). He decided to theorise the oceanic feeling—a 'purely subjective fact'—by looking to 'the ideational content which is most readily associated' with it (Freud 2010, 25). The 'ideational content' of a feeling is expressed by the language that we tend to attach to the feeling when we communicate about it. It is not identical to the feeling itself, nor does it fully exhaust our experience of it. Much as the phrase 'oneness with the universe' characteristically accompanies the oceanic feeling without defining it, an expression like 'footloose and fancy free' evokes the experience of spontaneous freedom.

To get a clearer sense of the ideational content of spontaneous freedom, it will help to have before us a richer and more detailed description. In Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, Peter Walsh, who has been living in India for years, travels to London to arrange a divorce for his married lover, Daisy Simmons. Shortly after his arrival, Peter 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)

The following features of Peter's experience of 'utter freedom' are noteworthy for us here.<sup>2</sup>

**Openness.** At the heart of Peter's experience of 'utter freedom' is a sense of openness and possibility. This sense of openness requires some degree of (a) *uncertainty* about what the future holds. Peter stands before 'endless avenues', not knowing which he will traverse. Of course, it is not as though *anything* is possible for Peter. But he

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<sup>2</sup> In describing Peter, I bracket considerations about the veridicality of his experience in order to focus on its content. In search of the nature of intentionality, Husserl argued that by taking conscious life 'just as what it quite immediately gives itself, as itself, to be', it might be possible to find intentionality 'in those familiar forms which, like everything actual in the surrounding world, find their expression in language' (Husserl 1970, 233). In other words, he regarded what would later be called 'ordinary language' as a useful input in phenomenological inquiry. Such an approach is well-suited to exploring spontaneous freedom. This is because, in everyday life, what people want is, precisely, to *experience* spontaneous freedom, not to 'have' it in some theoretical sense.

nonetheless feels faced with what we might call a broad subjective horizon of possibility.<sup>3</sup> He feels younger than he has in years, as though he has time-travelled to an earlier, more unsettled stage of his life, when less had been decided and more paths stretched out ahead.

Beyond this baseline subjective uncertainty about the future, experiencing spontaneous freedom involves feeling that one's course is not fully settled by one's own prior deliberation and planning.<sup>4</sup> Peter's stroll is (b) *unplanned* in that it neither consists in nor forms a part of some plan of action that he has previously deliberated about and settled upon. This is not to say that Peter's experience of freedom is inconsistent with any larger plans he might have—this late-morning stroll through Westminster is compatible with his plans to see old friends in London and file for Daisy's divorce. But in the moment when Peter's mind seems 'about to blow from its holding', he feels temporarily detached from the reasons he has come to London: the divorce seems 'all moonshine'. Part of what it is for Peter's stroll to be unplanned is that it is *unscripted* in that its course is not 'fixed by some preexisting "script", as with habit or rote rule-following as on an assembly line' (Ridge 2019, 4). As he stands in Trafalgar Square, Peter's life—or, at least, the rest of his afternoon—does not feel dictated to him either by his environment or by his own mental

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<sup>3</sup> In this respect, the experience of spontaneous freedom involves what Wayne Wu calls a 'branched behaviour space' (Wu 2019, 697) in which an agent 'confronts many potential actions at a time' (Wu 2019, 693).

<sup>4</sup> Philosophers use 'deliberation' in a variety of ways, and deliberation is incompatible with spontaneous freedom only on certain accounts. In a discussion of expertise, Hubert Dreyfus distinguishes two types of deliberation. In *involved* deliberation, an agent 'stays involved [in her situation] and tests and refines her intuition', which 'clears the way for an immediate intuitive response'. In *detached* deliberation, by contrast, an agent 'views the situation as an object with decontextualised features and then reasons out what to do', which 'might mean making a list of options and their utilities and calculating which action is optimal' (Dreyfus 2005, 53). Controlling one's behaviour through the sort of detached, intellectualised reflection involved in detached deliberation would be incompatible with spontaneous freedom. Peter is clearly free from detached deliberation when his mind goes down 'flat as a marsh'. But he may engage in involved deliberation throughout this episode of spontaneous freedom: he keeps up an inner monologue reflecting on his experience, but without stepping back from his situation or rationally vetting his immediate responses.

states. Indeed, the ‘endless avenues’ that lie before Peter are not foreclosed even by his own history and identity: he feels freed even ‘from being precisely what he was’.

Peter’s experience of freedom is not only unplanned, it is *experienced* by Peter as such. This distinguishes spontaneous freedom from habitual and routine activity, which may also display a sort of freedom from rational deliberation. For instance, when I get up in the morning and make coffee, I go through the motions of grinding the beans and pouring the water without reflecting on or planning out my movements. When I make coffee out of habit, I do not *regard* my activity as unsettled by my prior decisions—I simply do not have an attitude one way or the other. Insofar as habit is traceable to the accretion of prior decisions, if I were to contemplate the relationship between my coffee habits and my prior deliberation, I might regard today’s coffee-making as more or less settled by decisions that I made long ago, like my decision to purchase a coffee grinder and a French press, and to start drinking coffee in the first place (see Owens 2017, 173). Such habitual action is unlikely to afford a sensation of youth or of ‘irrepressible, exquisite delight’.

By contrast, Peter positively regards his stroll as unsettled by deliberation, plans, or scripts. It is in the context of this felt absence of plans that he finds himself suddenly ‘bowled over’ by his own emotions. Thus, while spontaneous freedom and habit both involve freedom from immediate deliberative control, Peter’s spontaneous freedom involves a further experience *as of* being free from it. Indeed, such experiences often result from an active break with habit and routine, which is why Woolf portrays utter freedom as something that ‘happens in the downfall of habit’, when the mind is an ‘unguarded flame’.

**Non-alienation.** Although Peter’s activity does not result from his own plans or conscious deliberation—indeed, although he experiences it as a reprieve from his own identity—he nonetheless experiences it as *his own*. Peter feels that he has escaped ‘from being precisely what he was’, but he also feels that it is *he* who has escaped, *he* who is utterly free. Peter is thus *unalienated* from his experience of spontaneous freedom, at least

in the following sense: he does not experience his activity as having its source in something external or alien to him. Peter might avoid alienation from his activity through what Harry Frankfurt calls 'identification', by positively deciding to endorse the desires that move him to let his attention drift around Trafalgar Square (Frankfurt 1988b, 168). But he need not do so in order to be unalienated in the weak sense I have in mind here, which is characterised not by any positive choice, but simply by the absence of a felt sense of being in the grip of alien forces. Whether or not Peter decisively identifies with his desires as he wanders through London, and whether or not he has reflected upon and endorsed them, the sense of 'delight' that he feels as he walks suggests that he implicitly regards them as his own.

**Optionality.** Peter's stroll is not just uncertain, unplanned, and unalienated, he also experiences it as *optional* rather than required, either by other people or by his own sense of duty. Peter's experience of spontaneous freedom is enabled by a temporary detachment from obligations and connections to other people. Clarissa is the only person who knows that Peter is in London, and he is not yet expected to make and keep appointments with friends. This feeling of detachment helps to make it possible for him to attend to 'the strangeness of standing alone, alive, unknown, at half-past eleven in Trafalgar Square'.

We have now drawn out the three most important features of spontaneous freedom, all of which are vividly portrayed in Woolf's description of Peter. Stepping back from the details of Peter's experience can help us to notice several further features.

**Intentionality.** Certain aspects of Peter's experience of freedom have intentional content: they are *about* or *directed at* features of the world. This intentional content may be veridical or not; to be veridical, an experience of spontaneous freedom must accompany activity that is *in fact* unplanned. If Peter felt 'utter freedom' while he was simply carrying out a plan that he had already set in motion, the reader would judge Peter to be deluded or his attitudes to be defective.

**Approach orientation.** Spontaneous freedom is often associated with positive affective states, like Peter's exquisite delight. But experiences of spontaneous freedom can also arise from more ambivalent states like boredom. 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). As 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' (Saki 1996, 64). The bored Carlotta simply accepts the lady's pronouncement and, enthusiastically and humorously (if negligently), takes up the position of governess for a few days. Boredom's potential to generate Carlotta's spontaneous activity suggests that while spontaneous freedom is not uniformly associated with positive affective states, it is typically associated with affects that have an 'approach orientation', where a state's orientation 'indicates whether the state focuses on approaching rewards or avoiding threats' (Gasper & Middlewood 2014, 50). Approach orientations can stem either from positive affective states, such as elation, or from negative ones, such as boredom: they activate 'a broad, global style of thought, which facilitates being open to new experiences and encourages finding novel associations' (Gasper & Middlewood 2014, 51; see Yao 2015).

**Scalarity.** Spontaneous freedom is not an on-or-off phenomenon, but something that we can have more or less of at any point in time. Experiences of spontaneous freedom vary in (a) scope, (b) intensity, and (c) duration.

The (a) *scope* of Peter's experience of freedom ranges over the direction of his attention, the course of his wandering, and the shape of the rest of his day. Other experiences of spontaneous freedom might encompass a much broader horizon of possibility. At certain vertiginous moments in our lives, we see vastly different paths stretching out before us in radically different directions, all of which might appear to us now as equally eligible and likely. With enough money in the bank, someone might feel

that they could set off to travel the world for a few years on a whim or that they could just as easily settle down and start a family. We can experience spontaneous freedom with respect to broad questions (What should I do with my summer? What will my next novel be about? How will I live together with other people?) or more circumscribed ones (Will I become a banker or a consultant? Will I go up the ridge or down the canyon?). As the scope of spontaneous freedom narrows, it may eventually dwindle to nothing, or nothing of value (Will I have a beer or a glass of wine? A pale ale or a stout? Will I pay with Visa or American Express?).

One noteworthy aspect of spontaneous freedom's scope variation concerns the types of behaviours that typically give rise to it. Many people report feeling particularly free when they are engaged in activities like skiing, cycling, or dancing that involve rapid or uninhibited bodily movement. Peter describes his experience of freedom using spatial imagery. He feels like a child who 'runs out of doors' and compares his freedom to an 'unguarded flame' that 'bows and bends and seems about to blow from its holding'. Other experiences of spontaneous freedom might take a narrower scope because they can range only over an agent's mental life: it may be possible to feel free even while in chains, but it is easier while surfing.

While Peter's experience of spontaneous freedom is relatively narrow in scope, it has great force and depth: it is an experience of 'utter' freedom. The (b) *intensity* of an experience of spontaneous freedom may depend on any number of contextual factors. The heightened intensity of Peter's experience arises from an almost complete, albeit temporary, detachment from his existing plans. But the amount of deliberation consistent with spontaneity depends on how much deliberation is usually called for by the sort of choice in question.<sup>5</sup> It is one thing to decide to quit my job, move to New Zealand, and start

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<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Seth Yalcin for this formulation.

a band after an hour of deliberation; it is quite another to spend an hour investigating alternatives before deciding which brand of plastic owl to buy to scare pigeons away from my balcony.

Experiences of spontaneous freedom also vary in (c) *duration*. Peter's intense experience lasts 'only ... for an hour or so', whereas an artist like Brahms, who spent fifteen years labouring over his First Symphony, might experience spontaneous freedom in a more diffuse, temporally extended way while composing. We might imagine Brahms gradually working out an overall plan while continually making small, spontaneous choices about certain melodies and phrases.<sup>6</sup> There may be limits on the possible duration of an experience of spontaneous freedom as intense as Peter's; experiencing such intense spontaneous freedom at every moment of one's life would be ethically undesirable even if it were psychologically possible.

To recap, spontaneous freedom involves subjectively unpredictable, unplanned, optional activity. This activity is experienced as the agent's 'own', not as an alien imposition. Some aspects of this experience have intentional content; this content is veridical when our activity really *is* unplanned and unscripted. Spontaneous freedom comes in degrees, varying in scope, intensity, and duration. It can accompany a variety of affective states, ranging from boredom to anticipation to unbridled joy.

We might fruitfully understand the experience of spontaneous freedom as a member of a broader family of experiences of 'openness', encompassing, *e.g.*, fun, boredom, adventure, creativity, relaxation, relief at escaping unpleasant obligations, daydreaming, mind-wandering, thoughtless routine, and even restless anxiety. Spontaneous freedom is, of course, a historically specific, post-Romantic phenomenon. A twelfth-century juggler who found himself with a free afternoon might have an experience of openness, but surely

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<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Alexander Bird for this example.

would not have experienced the same suite of attitudes and affects as Peter.<sup>7</sup> The historicity of such experiences should not, however, prevent us from recognising their contours and acknowledging their value.

### **§3. Spontaneous freedom in context**

With a description of spontaneous freedom in place, we can turn our attention to the conditions that enable and undermine it, both in our own psychologies and in the external world. While it may be difficult to draw a clear line between these two domains, let us consider the different ways in which (roughly) internal and (roughly) external conditions promote and inhibit spontaneous freedom.

We sometimes arrive at experiences of freedom by way of our own psychologies, for instance through meditation, reflection, or self-examination. We might call into question who we are and what our futures hold just by reflecting on the ideas we already have, critically examining them, and exploring their relationship to one another. Peter feels that his future lies open before him, such that he could wander down innumerable avenues *if he so chose*. Of course, a person cannot typically simply *choose* to be utterly free and have done with it. But Peter's 'escape' seems to result, if indirectly, from allowing himself to become the sort of person who is receptive to the strangeness of the world.

Our own psychologies can also prevent experiences of spontaneous freedom. In Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Captain Ahab seeks out the White Whale with such a deep singleness of purpose that no amount of bad omens or shipboard surprises can dissuade him from his monomania (Melville 1981, 187-92). While his shipmates on the *Pequod* find adventure and new vistas in a whaling cruise, Ahab is incapable of reconsidering what his future holds.

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<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Tom Pink for this example.

Feeling bound by duty might also prevent the experience of spontaneous freedom, insofar as duty dictates a person's actions. It is important to keep in mind that spontaneous freedom is not a moralised conception of freedom. It may be possible for some figure like Gauguin to experience spontaneous freedom by abandoning his family and heading to Tahiti for the sake of his art (see Williams 1981, 22-23). But for more morally typical agents, obligations like a lunch appointment or needing to pick the kids up from school are likely to interfere with experiences of spontaneous freedom.<sup>8</sup> This suggests that low-stakes settings, in which the risk that our spontaneity will harm other people is low, provide some of the most fertile ground for spontaneous freedom.

That such low-stakes settings are often inhabited by the wealthy and the secure suggests that the experience of spontaneous freedom also depends for its realisation on a broad range of social and material resources. 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 before, and has friends he can track down later. These resources enable Peter to experience his freedom joyfully rather than fearfully, as we might expect if he were plopped down in the heart of an unknown city with no resources or connections.

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<sup>8</sup> The extent to which feeling bound by an obligation interferes with spontaneous freedom depends on the specificity of the obligation. For someone who is committed to hosting good parties for their allergic friends, vacuuming up the cat hair beforehand will not appear optional, since it is undertaken in furtherance of that commitment. Insofar as this person can nonetheless experience spontaneous freedom while vacuuming, it must be either because their commitment to throwing a good, hypoallergenic party does not fully specify the details of their activity (perhaps they can dance while vacuuming without compromising efficacy, although then it would be the dancing, not the vacuuming, that was optional), or because a derivative sense of optionality comes from regarding throwing parties itself as optional (see Gingerich 2018, 835-37). Subscribing to a fully 'directive' view of morality would mean giving up even on such interstitial and derivative experiences of optionality. On such a view, morality would dictate not only whether we should party but how we should vacuum, leaving us with no 'breathing room' to feel that the future of our lives is not fixed (Shiffrin 1991, 249).

External circumstances can interfere with spontaneous freedom just as well as they can facilitate it. As Rogers Albritton notes, if I am glued 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, emphasis in original). As noted above, even being glued to one’s chair need not eliminate all opportunity for spontaneous freedom. While stuck in the balcony, I might find it in me to write a song in my head. But a sufficient narrowing of physical possibility will lead most of us to feel sufficiently alienated from our activity to undermine our ability to experience spontaneous freedom.

External constraints need not take the form of chains or glue to interfere with the experience of spontaneous freedom. People who inhabit precarious social and economic circumstances are likely to find their opportunities for spontaneous freedom severely limited in scope, intensity, or duration; to face unappealing trade-offs between spontaneous freedom and other goods; or to find no opportunity for unalienated activity at all. In *A Free Man*, journalist Aman Sethi tells the story of Mohammad Ashraf, an impoverished day labourer from Delhi (Sethi 2011). Ashraf works for a few weeks or months at a time on dangerous construction projects, then takes his earnings and spends them on food and alcohol until he runs out or 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 remarkably strong desire for *azadi*, or freedom, and he regards himself as ‘a free man’ because he has no obligations to family or institutions, so he can pick up and leave 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 strategically seeks experiences of spontaneous freedom to find a degree of pleasure in circumstances of deprivation and oppression. This is not to suggest his poverty

makes him free. Ashraf need not embrace the totality of his social circumstances to embrace the limited experiences of spontaneous freedom that they afford. Ashraf's story suggests that a yearning for spontaneous freedom is a widespread feature of the human experience, not just something sought by the wealthy once their other needs have been met. But the possibility of experiencing spontaneous freedom in terrible circumstances does not mean that such experiences are likely. Most people are more likely to respond to the sort of uncertainty that Ashraf faces with fear, anxiety, or a sense of alienation than to take it as an opportunity to experience spontaneous freedom. Even those like Ashraf who manage to find moments of spontaneous freedom in dire poverty are likely to have a more restricted experience of spontaneous freedom than those who are better off, and to experience spontaneous freedom only by sacrificing other goods. Ashraf says that his freedom 'comes only from solitude', but for the rich, spontaneous freedom does not require leading an entirely rootless or solitary life. Experiences of spontaneous freedom are typically more robust, expansive, and joyous for people like Peter Walsh and Lady Carlotta, who are sufficiently well-off that they can feel that they have nothing to lose by spending a few days or weeks pursuing a whim.

Racism, sexism, and ideology can also undermine the experience of spontaneous freedom. Peter Walsh has no childcare obligations and can pop over to London from India for a few weeks and spend a day wandering the city without risking harm to his dependents. Daisy Simmons, whom Peter plans to marry, cannot: she has two young children to care for (Woolf 2005, 44). In the contemporary world, most people find themselves in circumstances closer to Daisy's than to Peter's—between work and caring responsibilities, few of us can experience spontaneous freedom for more than a few hours at a time, if at all. But this is particularly true of those on whom sexism and racism have placed disproportionate burdens to care for others. To make matters worse, sexism and racism often prevent people from experiencing spontaneous freedom even in objectively

low-stakes situations that should provide opportunities for spontaneity, such as when the threat of sexual harassment restricts one's spontaneity in choosing what sort of outfit to wear to a party (see Kennedy 1992).<sup>9</sup>

In the face of such material and ideological constraints, some of us hope to defer our spontaneity until later in life, perhaps when we are retired and the kids are all grown up. But as in the case of moral attitudes, 'rehearsals insensibly modulate towards true performances' (Strawson 2008, 20). Postponing spontaneity for years or decades is a risky strategy, for one's psyche might grow as calcified as Ahab's in the meantime.

Because experiencing spontaneous freedom requires social and material resources, spontaneous freedom poses a political problem. For instance, as we have seen, equitable access to spontaneous freedom would require widespread social support for childcare and resistance to gendered double standards that celebrate spontaneity in men rather than women. While this might suffice to allow the prosperous Daisy Simmons to feel as free as the prosperous Peter Walsh, it would not be enough to allow Ashraf to experience both freedom and connection, or even to help Ahab loosen up a bit. Truly widespread and equitable access to spontaneous freedom would require profound changes in the way we live, work, and care for one another. When labour markets and employers restrict workers' access to leisure time, suspending one's ordinary routines can feel risky or impossible. By contrast, a society that met people's material needs, whether through robust welfare protections or other means, would enable more people to experience substantial spontaneous freedom more often and more joyfully.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to Hallie Liberto for raising this point.

<sup>10</sup> While oppression constrains spontaneous freedom, spontaneous freedom can also prepare us to resist oppression. For Audre Lorde, the erotic, which is 'a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings', can 'give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world' (Lorde 1984, 54-59). Lorde's erotic involves experiencing our activity as arising from a source within us that is neither introspectively transparent nor reflectively endorsed. While the white patriarchal tradition restricts our experiences of the erotic to formulaic sexual

#### §4. The value of spontaneous freedom

One might wonder: is spontaneous freedom worth experiencing mostly just because we happen to desire it, as we might desire to travel to new countries or drink good wine? If so, an account of spontaneous freedom might have little to add to existing philosophical debates about freedom. However, I will argue that the experiences of spontaneous freedom that many people desire realise substantial values by enabling paradigmatic forms of artistic creativity, activating our capacity for novelty and originality, and unburdening us from the feeling that we are precisely our rational, deliberative natures. Although, as I have acknowledged, certain instantiations of spontaneous freedom may be morally dangerous, spontaneous freedom can nonetheless be part of a compelling ethical ideal (see Wolf 2015).

The value of experiencing spontaneous freedom comes, in part, from how it allows a certain sort of artistic creativity to flourish. While artistic creativity can take many different forms and can have a wide array of motivations, one paradigmatic and important form is the creativity of ‘genius’ that Kant regards as necessary for the production of beautiful art (Kant 2000, 5:307). For Kant, the ‘primary characteristic’ of artistic genius is originality: 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). While such originality does not, alone, suffice for the creation of beautiful art, artists must take themselves not to be merely following a plan.<sup>11</sup>

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routines, the spontaneity of Lorde’s erotic destabilises ideologies of gender and racial oppression by refusing to follow these predictable scripts. Insofar as spontaneous freedom also involves acting in ways that break out of habitual and routine forms of deference and hierarchy, experiences of spontaneous freedom can also destabilise architectures of oppression and, like Lorde’s erotic, nourish resistance.

<sup>11</sup> Even philosophers who take a much less romantic view of creativity than Kant acknowledge the necessity of *some* degree of creativity for the creation of a great deal of valuable art (see, e.g., Hills & Bird 2019, 710). For a fuller account of the relationship between spontaneous freedom and the creation of beautiful art, see Gingerich n.d.-b.

The connection between spontaneous freedom and artistic creativity helps to illuminate the value of spontaneous freedom outside the context of artistic expression as well. Experiences of spontaneous freedom realise what Hannah Arendt calls ‘the capacity of beginning something anew’ (Arendt 1998, 9). We exercise this power to originate when we act in ways that do not simply execute previously made decisions. According to Arendt’s distinctive philosophy of action, all free action has the character of ‘startling unexpectedness’, of something that ‘cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before’ (Arendt 1998, 178). Action for Arendt involves ‘inaugurating new processes in the world that, while not coming from nowhere, can nevertheless be unpredictable, unprecedented, and surprising’ (McMahon 2019, 65). Feeling that our decisions and activities were all planned in advance would frustrate this capacity to experience ourselves as sources of freshness and novelty.

One need not adopt Arendt’s theory of action to see the value realised by acting in ways that have not already been planned and set forth, by others or even by ourselves. To act in such a way is to confirm that we are not trapped by our own histories. While experiencing spontaneous freedom at every moment of one’s life would be neither psychologically sustainable nor consistent with discharging one’s ethical duties, experiencing it at least on occasion is necessary to fully exercise a power that may be as deeply central to being human as is the capacity for rational deliberation.

In addition to realising our power for novelty and creation, the experience of spontaneous freedom promotes more receptive capacities as well. Much as Nietzsche thinks that classic Greek tragedy allowed its audience to experience a temporary dissolution of selfhood (Nietzsche 1999, §17), experiences of spontaneous freedom can provide a feeling of relief at finding that we are not exhausted by our individual, rational, deliberative natures. When Peter escapes ‘from being precisely what he was’, he can experience the ‘exquisite delight’ that comes from feeling that ‘inside his brain *by another hand* strings were pulled

[and] shutters moved'. He experiences his freedom as a sort of relief from being caught up in the activities of planning, reasoning, and deliberating. Perhaps paradoxically, such relief can be occasioned both by experiences of spontaneous freedom and by the freedom from deliberation characteristic of habit and routine, for both types of experience enable us to identify the source of our activities with deep and unstructured commitments, rather than with introspectively transparent plans. Such identification can help us to see ourselves as more continuous with nature and with other people, affording at least fleeting relief from the pain of individuation and the existential anxiety that can come from seeing ourselves as atoms in an indifferent universe (Nietzsche 1999, §8).

Some forms of spontaneous freedom are, of course, more valuable than others. We might have a tepid experience of spontaneous freedom while surveying the endless avenues of breakfast cereals that lie open before us at Tesco. 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.<sup>12</sup> Those experiences of spontaneous freedom associated with a richer horizon of possibility, or characterised by a high degree of intensity or an extended duration, will tend to realise the values I have just described to a greater extent. This means that circumstances of oppression and material deprivation are likely to lead not only to fewer, but also to less valuable, experiences of spontaneous freedom.

### **§5. Spontaneous freedom and free will**

In the remainder of this essay, I argue that appreciating the value of spontaneous freedom and its socio-political character provides insight into philosophical debates about

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<sup>12</sup> Experiences of consumer choice might not qualify as veridical experiences of spontaneous freedom at all, because even when one's decision to buy Weetabix is not settled in advance by one's own plans, it might be more or less settled in advance by the plans of other agents such as marketers, grocery store owners, or bureaucrats. For a fuller discussion of this issue, see Gingerich n.d.-a.

free will. My account of spontaneous freedom lends support to compatibilism, since the value of spontaneous freedom is not the sort of thing that could be undermined by the truth or falsity of a metaphysical thesis like determinism. At the same time, my account suggests that there is a sort of freedom ‘worth wanting’ that requires something more than the sort of freedom that many compatibilists recognise.

In keeping with the focus of contemporary moral philosophy on the freedom of autonomy and responsible moral agency, the problem of free will is most commonly presented as a problem about responsibility: in what way must we be free in order for our practices of blaming, praising, punishing, and rewarding to be justified? However, a significant minority of libertarian incompatibilists reject compatibilism not only out of concerns about moral responsibility but also on the ground that true freedom requires the ability to create by ‘bring[ing] forth something that is not implicit in the past’ (Anglin 1990, 14). This incompatibilist demand for creativity maintains that any sort of freedom that could exist if determinism were true would lack the sparkle of freshness and originality that true freedom requires (Kane 1998, 81; Barrett 1958, 31). For these libertarian incompatibilists, the freedom to create in a way that allows us to originate genuinely new value is a sort of freedom worth wanting, which we could not have if determinism were true (Clarke 2003, 111).

By contrast, for compatibilists who are concerned with creativity, a more naturalistically plausible sort of creativity is all that we could reasonably want. 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 the laws

of nature or the causal order of events.<sup>13</sup> Other compatibilists, less concerned with creativity than Barnes, maintain that we already have all the freedom that is worth wanting so long as we are ‘in control of ourselves, and not under the control of others’ (Dennett 1984, 169). For Harry Frankfurt, once we wholeheartedly identify with the desires that move us to act, we have ‘all the freedom for which finite creatures could reasonably hope’ or even ‘conceive’ (Frankfurt 2006, 15-16).

P.F. Strawson famously argues in ‘Freedom and Resentment’ that libertarian ‘pessimists’ about the relationship between determinism and free will should give up their metaphysical commitment to incompatibilism, because the justification of our ordinary practices of blame, resentment, praise, and so forth could not depend on the truth or falsity of a universally applicable metaphysical thesis like determinism (Strawson 2008). At the same time, Strawson suggests that in exchange for a ‘formal withdrawal’ from their metaphysical commitments, the libertarian should be offered a ‘vital concession’ by the compatibilist: an acknowledgment that our moral practices cannot be justified on the basis of a straightforward utilitarian calculation but must be justified according to standards internal to the practices themselves (Strawson 2008, 2). Strawson focuses on moral practices and attitudes, rather than creativity or originality, but I will argue that in the domain of arguments about originality the libertarian should also offer a ‘formal withdrawal’ from their metaphysical commitments in exchange for a ‘vital concession’ from the compatibilist: that we should recognise the value of the *sort* of freedom that interests the libertarian.

Incompatibilists concerned with originality are moved by the same considerations that cause many people to yearn for spontaneous freedom. Experiences of spontaneous freedom let us feel that we are sources of novelty and freshness; rejoice in the fact that we

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<sup>13</sup> Other compatibilists, like Maria Kronfeldner, theorise creativity more positively, in terms of originality and spontaneity rather than the absence of manipulation; however, Kronfeldner does not see spontaneity as a form of freedom (Kronfeldner 2009, 592).

encompass more depth than our conscious, reflective natures contain; and trust that we can draw upon that depth while remaining, in some sense, ourselves. Such experiences of spontaneous freedom should appeal to libertarian worries 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 realises the values embodied in the libertarian desire for freshness than does the freedom from manipulation offered by compatibilists like Barnes, because veridical experiences of spontaneous freedom require an agent’s activity to be free not only from ‘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. Spontaneous freedom satisfies the libertarian’s sense that free agents must not be ‘stifle[d] with boredom’ (Barrett 1958, 31) in a way that bare freedom from manipulation does not.

However, because experiences of spontaneous freedom involve feeling not that our activity is uncaused, but that it is unplanned, our lives could be entirely caused by the natural world and its laws and yet still—veridically—be experienced as spontaneously free. Indeed, the desirability of an experience of spontaneous freedom is not the *sort* of thing that could be undermined by the truth or falsity of a metaphysical thesis like determinism. Such a thesis cannot allow for ‘compromise, borderline-style answers’ (Strawson 2008, 21): if determinism were true, it would hold of all people, always and everywhere. Whereas, as we have seen, spontaneous freedom comes in degrees of scope, intensity, and duration, and is something that we often experience more at certain moments in our lives (like adolescence or the ‘mid-life crisis’) than at others. Furthermore, while nothing we do can affect the truth or falsity of the thesis of determinism, spontaneous freedom is something that we can cultivate or inhibit as we shape our psychic and political lives. Insofar as spontaneous freedom already realises the values of novelty and originality with which the libertarian is

concerned without requiring any metaphysical extravagance, we are well positioned to ask the libertarian to make a ‘formal withdrawal’ from their metaphysical commitments.

Libertarian partisans of creativity might object that the experience of spontaneous freedom does not provide all the creativity that we might reasonably want, because the experience of spontaneous freedom falls short of an experience of *genuine* novelty or creativity. The libertarian might say, ‘Because the experience of spontaneous freedom is *merely* an experience of acting in a way that is not settled in advance by plans, it 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.’

But the truth or falsity of determinism does not seem to matter for whether anyone experiences their activity as creative or spontaneously free. Learning that determinism is true would not undermine Peter Walsh’s experience of freedom nearly so much as 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 spontaneity from those of tedium or constraint.

The libertarian incompatibilist might still 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 our first-personal experiences. The libertarian might claim that *genuine* novelty requires that I am objectively able to contribute value to the world, not just as a vehicle through which nature operates, but *as an individual* whose actions introduce value that ‘was not presaged by or already fully counted’ in the world’s previous instrumental value (Nozick 1983, 311). While this allows the libertarian to insist that the phenomenology of freedom is orthogonal to the metaphysical problem of free will, doing so comes at a significant cost, since many

incompatibilists see appeals to phenomenology as an important means of making progress on the intractable dispute with compatibilism (see Ginet 1990, 13-14; Kane 1998, 147).

Even more challenging, for the libertarian to show that veridical experiences of spontaneous freedom fail to realise a sort of creative freedom that is worth wanting, they must provide an account of the values that are instantiated by incompatibilist creativity but not by spontaneous freedom. While possibly surmountable, showing that there is some *further* value of creating new beginnings that is realised by incompatibilist freedom but *not* by spontaneous freedom is a steep hill for the libertarian to climb.<sup>14</sup>

Although my account of spontaneous freedom undermines the motivation for libertarian incompatibilism by showing that much of the value of originality that the libertarian seeks can be achieved without abandoning a compatibilist metaphysics, it also asks for a 'vital concession' from the compatibilist. Existing compatibilist accounts of freedom may preserve our practices of responsibility, but they are insufficient to secure the freedom of spontaneity. 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.

## **§6. Conclusion**

I have argued that spontaneous freedom is a valuable form of freedom that goes beyond the freedom that comes from being in control of oneself, which some compatibilists take to be the only sort of freedom 'worth wanting' (Dennett 1984, 169). As I said at the

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<sup>14</sup> The libertarian might yet object that appeals to the broadly ethical values associated with different forms of freedom are just as orthogonal to the metaphysical question as are appeals to phenomenology. However, such a move threatens to undermine the entire rationale for the libertarian's position, because the reason that compatibilist freedom was rejected in the first place was its inability to allow ethical and aesthetic values associated with creativity to be fully realised.

outset, I have nothing to say against theories of freedom that focus on something other than spontaneity, whether it be the conditions of moral responsibility or the metaphysics of causation. However, insofar as my account has shown that spontaneous freedom is a valuable sort of freedom, we should resist some of the more absolute claims that participants in the free will debate occasionally make. For instance, we should resist the claims of some compatibilists that the freedom that comes from being in control of oneself is the only sort of freedom ‘worth wanting’ (Dennett 1984) or that someone who ‘is free to do what he wants to do’ and ‘to want what he wants to want’ has ‘all the freedom that is possible to desire or conceive’ (Frankfurt 1988a, 22-23). Frankfurt may be right that ‘blind rollicking spontaneity is not exactly the hallmark of our species’ (Frankfurt 2006, 1). But as innumerable pop songs testify, many of us hope for it to be a hallmark of our lives.<sup>15</sup>

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