

## SPONTANEOUS FREEDOM

Jonathan Gingerich

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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 I contend that spontaneous freedom can provide all the freshness and novelty that we want without requiring an incompatibilist metaphysics.

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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). Hume distinguishes 'liberty of indifference' from 'liberty of spontaneity', but by 'liberty of spontaneity' he means something like the freedom to do what one wills or chooses to do, rather than the spontaneous freedom of free spirits that I have in mind here (Hume 1888, 407). Exceptions to the neglect of the freedom of unscriptedness in moral philosophy include work on the 'free spirit' as an 'ethical ideal' (see Geuss 1995) and on freedom as involving uncertainty about the future (see Garnett 2013; Suppes 1995). Ethicists and political philosophers also occasionally celebrate spontaneity as an aspect of living well, but without connecting spontaneity to freedom or explicitly theorising it (see, eg, Dworkin 2011, 199; Raz 1986, 294).

Spontaneous freedom raises a political problem, not a metaphysical one; we need collective action, not metaphysical indeterminism, to secure it.

Before I begin, I wish to note 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 likely 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, 58-59), one of which concerns the possibility of genuine spontaneity.

## **§2. SPONTANEOUS FREEDOM**

At first approximation, 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 without precisely capturing it.

In seeking the ideational content of spontaneous freedom, I will proceed phenomenologically, initially ‘parenthesising’ ontological questions in order to focus on the *content* of the experience (Husserl 1960, 20-1; Smith & McIntyre 1982, 95-96). Such an approach is attractive here because, in everyday life, people want, precisely, to *experience* spontaneous freedom, not only to ‘have’ it in some more objective sense. For clarity, I will henceforth refer to ‘the experience of spontaneous freedom’ to indicate the subjective, first-personal experience of freedom that I am studying without any judgment as to the ‘fittingness’ or ‘veridicality’ of that experience. I will use the phrase ‘spontaneous freedom’ to refer to such experiences when they satisfy certain fittingness or veridicality conditions (which will be specified below). Exploring the phenomenological contours and ideational content of the experience of spontaneous freedom will both reveal the veridicality conditions of spontaneous freedom and illuminate the nature of the experience itself.

To get a clearer sense of the ideational content of the experience of spontaneous freedom, it will help to have a richer and more detailed description before us. In Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, Peter Walsh, who has been living in India for years, travels to London to arrange a divorce so that he can wed his married lover, Daisy Simmons.<sup>2</sup> Shortly after his arrival, Peter has a remarkable experience:

And just because nobody yet knew he was in London, except Clarissa [Dalloway], and the earth, after the voyage, still seemed an island to him, the strangeness of standing alone, alive, unknown, at half-past eleven in

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<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee from *Mind* for suggestions that helped to improve my presentation of this case.

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.

**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 nonetheless feels faced with what we might call a broad subjective horizon of possibility that presents an indefinitely large range of possible paths to him. He feels younger than he has in years, as though he has time-travelled to an earlier, more unsettled stage of his life.

Beyond this baseline subjective uncertainty about the future, experiencing spontaneous freedom involves feeling that one's course is not fully settled by prior

deliberation and plans.<sup>3</sup> Peter's stroll is (b) *unplanned* in that it neither constitutes nor forms a part of some plan of action that he or anyone else has previously deliberated about and settled upon. This is not to say that Peter's freedom is inconsistent with any of his larger plans—after his stroll through Westminster is done, Peter may go about 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 not 'fixed by some preexisting "script", as with habit or rote rule-following as on an assembly line' (Ridge 2019, 4). As the language of 'scripts' suggests, a plan is a more specific intention for action than mere inspiration or influence. There is a great deal of difference between being inspired by an ideal that one subscribed to earlier in one's life and following a script that one prepared for oneself, and there is a difference between channelling the spirit of a novelist who one holds up as an inspiration and writing in precisely the way that one's teacher tells one to.<sup>4</sup> As he stands in Trafalgar Square, Peter's life—or, at least, the rest of his afternoon—does not

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<sup>3</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 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.

<sup>4</sup> Many cases will be murkier: to what extent am I following a plan if I become a doctor in part because my grandmother hoped for me to become one and in part because she wrote her will so that I will only inherit if I become one? To what extent must a plan be the product of a single planning agent's intentions, and to what extent can the operations of a corporate body or the operations of society generate plans? Resolving such questions will require a fuller account of the nature of plans than I can offer here.

feel dictated to him either by his environment, by other people ('his old nurse'), or by his own mental states. 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 moment in Trafalgar Square is not only unscripted and unplanned, Peter also *experiences* it as such. In other words, the unplannedness of the experience of spontaneous freedom is transparent to the subject of the experience. This distinguishes spontaneous freedom from habitual and routine activity, which may also be unplanned in the sense that it is not the outcome of 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. At the same time, 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 feels his stroll to be 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 the experiences of spontaneous freedom and habit both involve freedom from immediate deliberative control, Peter's experience incorporates a further experience *as of* being free from such control. This 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 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 identify so explicitly or decisively with his desires in order to be unalienated in the weak sense I have in mind here, which does not require any positive choice and is characterised simply by the absence of a felt sense of being in the grip of alien forces.

Being unalienated from one's experience, in the sense that concerns me, does not necessarily require that one's experience arise from a source 'inside' rather than 'outside' the self.<sup>5</sup> Artists who feel inspired by the muse may feel that the source of their inspiration is 'external' to them without feeling alienated from it. Similarly, when Peter stands 'at the opening of endless avenues', he feels that 'he' has 'nothing to do with it' and that 'inside his brain by another hand strings were pulled'. This felt externality does not cause Peter to regard his experience as an alien imposition. Whether or not Peter decisively identifies with his desires as he wanders through London, whether or not these desires are 'external' to Peter's self, and whether or not he has reflected upon and endorsed them, the sense of 'delight' that he feels as he walks suggests that he at least implicitly regards them as his own.

**Non-obligatoriness.** Peter's stroll is not just uncertain, unplanned, and unalienated, he also does not experience it as required, in the sense that what Peter does is not dictated by his explicit or implicit beliefs about what other people, the law, or

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee from *Ethics* for suggestions that helped to formulate this paragraph.



substantive moral duties demand. Since spontaneous freedom is not a moralised conception of freedom, it may be possible for some figure like Gauguin to find 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 like Peter, obligations like a lunch appointment or needing to pick the kids up from school are likely to interfere with the emergence of spontaneous freedom. For this reason, Peter's experience of spontaneous freedom is enabled by a temporary detachment from feelings of obligation 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'.

**Intentionality.** Peter's experience of freedom has intentional content, in that it is *about* or *directed at* features of the world. This means that the experience of spontaneous freedom can be evaluated for fittingness or veridicality. For an experience of spontaneous freedom to be veridical, it must be about activity that is *in fact* unplanned and unscripted, unalienated, and non-obligatory. Each of the conditions that we have identified is about the subject's experience, but in each case, that experience represents the world as being a certain way. In the case of the non-alienation and non-obligatoriness conditions, the aspect of the world that is represented in the subject's experience is the subject's own psychology, so for these aspects of the experience to be non-veridical would require self-deception or self-opacity. By contrast, the openness condition refers not only to the subject's own psychology, but also to the plans and schemes of others. This means that experiences of openness can be non-veridical even if the subject has full insight into their own psychology. For instance, if, unbeknownst to Peter, an evil genius had set things up precisely so that Peter would fall in love with Daisy, travel to London, and take a seemingly spontaneous stroll around Westminster on a June day, then Peter's experience of

spontaneous freedom would not be veridical because it would not be truly unplanned.<sup>6</sup> This feature of the openness condition is part of what gives spontaneous freedom potential political import, since we need the forbearance of others to have fully veridical experiences of openness and therefore of spontaneous freedom.<sup>7</sup>

In the remainder of this essay, I will be concerned primarily with experiences of spontaneous freedom whose intentional content is veridical, and I use the phrase ‘spontaneous freedom’ to refer to a subject’s veridical experience of unscripted, unplanned, unalienated, non-obligatory activity.<sup>8</sup> Spontaneous freedom thus consists of a subjective experience paired with the satisfaction of conditions, concerning both one’s own psychology and the ‘outside’ world, that make that experience veridical.

We have now drawn out the four central features of spontaneous freedom. Stepping back from the details of Woolf’s vivid description of Peter can help us to notice several further features. To be precise, the four conditions we have already discussed are necessary features of spontaneous freedom, although I am not here committed to the claim that they are sufficient. The two further features are not necessary. The first concerns the affect that is associated with paradigmatic instances of spontaneous freedom, such as those evoked by the poems and song lyrics with which we began. The second concerns a dimension of variation among instances of spontaneous freedom.

**Approach orientation.** Spontaneous freedom is often associated with positive affective states, like Peter’s ‘exquisite delight’ or Whitman’s ‘light-hearted’ pleasure on the

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, if Peter never learned that his walk had been planned by the evil genius, this sort of planning would not matter for his subjective experience of spontaneous freedom. However, the dismayed reaction that Peter would likely have if he were to discover the presence of such an evil genius gives us reason to think that his experience also has intentional content.

<sup>7</sup> For a fuller discussion of this issue, see Gingerich no date-a.

<sup>8</sup> I assume that Peter’s experience of spontaneous freedom is indeed veridical, in that there is no indication in the novel that his stroll is, in any sense, planned out in advance either by Peter or by anyone else. I am grateful to an anonymous referee from *Mind* for pressing me on this point.

open road. But spontaneous freedom can also arise from more ambivalent affective states such as boredom. In Agnès Varda's film *Vagabond*, having grown bored and fed up with her work as a secretary, the protagonist Mona abandons her middle-class comforts in favour of a life of vagrancy (Varda 2000). Discontent with the drudgery of office work has apparently driven Mona to wander around Languedoc with her tent on her back, not knowing where she will sleep this night or the next.<sup>9</sup> Becoming a vagabond does not eliminate Mona's boredom, but it dramatically changes its character, from the drudgery of work to the ennui of not knowing what she will do next. Boredom's potential to prompt spontaneity suggests that while spontaneous freedom is not uniformly associated with positive affective states, it is typically associated with affects that have an 'approach orientation'. An affective state's 'orientation' 'indicates whether the state focuses on approaching rewards or avoiding threats' (Gasper & Middlewood 2014, 50). Approach orientations activate 'a broad, global style of thought, which facilitates being open to new experiences and encourages finding novel associations' (Gasper & Middlewood 2014, 51). Such orientations can stem either from positive affective states such as elation, or from negative ones such as boredom (see Yao 2015).

**Scalarity.** Spontaneous freedom is not an on-or-off phenomenon; it can vary in (a) scope, (b) intensity, and (c) duration. The (a) *scope* of Peter's freedom ranges over the direction of his attention, the course of his wandering, and the shape of the rest of his day. Other instances of spontaneous freedom might encompass a much broader horizon of

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<sup>9</sup> Varda's portrayal of Mona is ambiguous and conflicted. In Varda's words, *Vagabond* is about 'freedom and dirt' and aims to depict a character who 'live[s] out [her] freedom in a wild and solitary way' (quoted in Darke 2008). Mona is, in many respects, an unsympathetic character who appears incapable of sustaining meaningful relationships for more than a few days and who ends up freezing to death alone in an irrigation ditch. But at the same time, the other characters in Varda's film recognise something deeply attractive about Mona's freedom, which Mona herself clearly prizes. The attractions of Mona's vagrancy arise, in significant part, from her ability to experience spontaneous freedom, while her fate signals the dangers of a purely solitary, unilateral pursuit of such freedom.

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. Spontaneous freedom can encompass broad questions (What will I do with my life?) or more circumscribed ones (What will I do with my day off?). As the scope of spontaneous freedom narrows, it may eventually dwindle to almost nothing (What will I do in the five minutes between my lectures? Will I have the Cheerio's or the Weetabix?).<sup>10</sup>

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. Sartre, for instance, comments on the distinctive way people apprehend themselves as free when they slide across snow on skis (Sartre 1993, 581-85). Peter likewise describes his 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 instances 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 in chains, but it is easier while surfing.

Although Peter's 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 instance of spontaneous freedom may depend on any number of contextual factors. The heightened intensity of Peter's freedom arises from an almost complete, albeit temporary, detachment

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<sup>10</sup> The relatively narrow scope of Peter's freedom in Trafalgar Square is what sets him apart from people to whom the label 'free spirit' might be more readily applied, such as Varda's Mona.

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>11</sup> It is one thing to quit my job, move to New Zealand, and start a band after an hour's thought; it is quite another to spend an hour deliberating before deciding to spend my weekend going for a walk in the Cotswolds.

Instances of spontaneous freedom also vary in (c) *duration*. Peter's intense experience lasts 'only ... for an hour or so', whereas we might imagine a romantic poet who spends years labouring over an epic poem who gradually works out an overall plan while continually making small, spontaneous choices about certain lines and stanzas.<sup>12</sup> Such a poet might, in the right mindset, experience their composition of the entire poem as spontaneously free in some respects. There may be limits on the possible duration of spontaneous freedom as intense as Peter's; having such intense spontaneous freedom at every moment of one's life would be ethically undesirable even if it were psychologically possible.

As spontaneous freedom comes in degrees, so too do (d) *obstacles* to it. The extent to which a plan interferes with spontaneous freedom depends in large part on the specificity of the plan. The more specific a plan is, the more it interferes with spontaneous freedom. A detail-oriented evil genius who planned out Peter's entire morning to the minute would interfere with his spontaneous freedom much more than a less exacting evil genius who was only concerned to ensure that Peter pass through Trafalgar Square at some point before noon.

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<sup>11</sup> I am grateful to Seth Yalcin for this formulation.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of how Wordsworth's composition of *The Prelude* manifested creative developments that Wordsworth did not consciously intend in his initial drafting of the work, see Bushell 2005.

To recap, the experience of spontaneous freedom involves unplanned, unscripted, non-obligatory activity that is experienced as the subject's 'own' rather than as an alien imposition. The experience of spontaneous freedom has intentional content and is veridical when the activity really *is* unplanned, unscripted, unalienated, and non-obligatory. Spontaneous freedom comes in degrees, varying in scope, intensity, and duration, as do the main obstacles to spontaneous freedom. It can accompany a variety of affective states, ranging from ennui to anticipation to unbridled joy, although it paradigmatically accompanies affective states that involve an openness to novelty.

We might fruitfully understand spontaneous freedom as a member of a broader family of *experiences of openness*, encompassing, eg, fun, adventure, creativity, relaxation, relief at escaping unpleasant obligations, daydreaming, mind-wandering, thoughtless routine, and even restless anxiety. As with all human experiences, the ways in which we experience spontaneous freedom are inflected by history and culture: a twelfth-century juggler who found himself with a free afternoon might have an experience of spontaneous freedom, but would not have experienced precisely the same suite of attitudes and affects as Peter and would not value spontaneous freedom in the same terms as inhabitants of today's post-Romantic world.<sup>13</sup>

### **§3. SPONTANEOUS FREEDOM IN CONTEXT**

With a description of spontaneous freedom in place, we can turn our attention to the conditions that enable or undermine its emergence. Because spontaneous freedom has both an experiential aspect and intentional content, these conditions include both factors about our own psychologies and factors about the world. It may be difficult to draw a clear line between what we might think of as 'internal' and 'external' factors, since external constraints 'cannot by themselves prevent anyone from doing anything; they require the

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<sup>13</sup> I am grateful to Thomas Pink for this example.

cooperation of internal factors' (Côté 2020, 400). In distinguishing 'internal' and 'external' factors in this section, I do not mean to endorse any particular conception of the self, or to suggest that a bright and principled line can be drawn between what is inside the self and what is outside. It is nonetheless helpful to consider the different ways in which (roughly) internal and (roughly) external conditions might promote or inhibit spontaneous freedom; these categories may point to different sorts of interventions that are likely to promote or undermine spontaneous freedom.

We sometimes arrive at spontaneous freedom by roughly psychological means—for instance, through meditation, reflection, or self-examination. We might call into question who we are and what our futures hold simply 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 minutes after his episode of spontaneous freedom draws to an close, Peter reflects that 'his fun ... was half made up, as he knew very well ... made up, as one makes up the better part of life' (Woolf 2005, 53). Peter's 'escape' seems to result at least as much from his inner willingness to 'make up' an opportunity for fun or play as it does from the external stimuli of London. On other occasions, spontaneous freedom external influences seem to prompt. For instance, psychotropic drugs such as alcohol, cannabis, and LSD are common lubricants of spontaneous freedom that people use to encourage their patterns of thinking to become less constrained.<sup>14</sup>

Obstacles to spontaneous freedom can arise both from our own psychologies and from external factors. Moreover, the interplay between internal and external prompts and

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<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of how psychedelics may contribute to dismantling 'automated and rigid' brain behaviours, see Carhart-Harris et al 2016.

obstacles to spontaneous freedom makes it hard to identify the absence of any given obstacle as a necessary condition for experiencing spontaneous freedom. Most of us would find it hard to experience spontaneous freedom while sitting in a cubicle doing data entry, but someone with a particularly open and creative psychology might manage to do so, while someone with a sufficiently rigid psychology might not experience spontaneous freedom even in the most conducive circumstances. There are, however, certain types of obstacles that typically, although not always, need to be cleared away for people to have and to take pleasure in veridical experiences of spontaneous freedom.

Internally, spontaneous freedom can be blocked by a psychology that resists or fears experiences of openness or that is encumbered by undue feelings of obligation or by overly rigid goals. In extreme cases, such a person might feel largely unable to act other than according to plan. Consider, for instance, Captain Ahab of *Moby Dick*. In spite of a remarkable number of bad omens and shipboard mishaps that would prompt a more typical character to consider revising the aims of their whaling cruise, Ahab's monomaniacal commitment to catching the White Whale precludes any such reconsideration (see Melville 1981, 187-92). While many members of his crew find opportunities to remake themselves, in one way or another, in the surprising vistas that the *Pequod* encounters, Ahab appears flatly incapable of reconsidering what his future holds. Subscribing to certain moral theories might also prevent someone from experiencing spontaneous freedom. For instance, if I subscribe to a fully 'directive' view of morality, which regards every single action that I take as dictated by moral duty, I will be left with no 'breathing room' to feel that the future of my life is not fixed (Shiffrin 1991, 249). Likewise, people who suffer from severe dissociative identity disorders that leave them feeling persistently alienated from their own activity may find themselves incapable of experiencing spontaneous freedom so long as this sense of alienation persists (see DePrince, Huntjens & Dorahy 2015). So, to experience spontaneous freedom one needs a set of psychological dispositions and commitments that



do not prevent one from having subjective experiences of openness, non-obligation, and non-alienation.

External circumstances can also interfere with spontaneous freedom, in two ways. First, external obstacles can undermine spontaneous freedom *directly* by undermining the veridicality of the openness condition. For instance, if Peter Walsh were controlled by one of the evil geniuses described above, his experience of spontaneous freedom could not be veridical.<sup>15</sup> Of course, this need not interfere at all with his ability to have a subjective experience of spontaneous freedom—if Peter never learned of the evil genius’s existence, his first-personal experience would be unaltered.

External obstacles can also undermine experiences of freedom more indirectly, by interfering with the actualisation of the psychological dispositions and capacities that allow people to experience spontaneous freedom, and/or to find joy in such experiences. This can happen in a number of ways, of which I list just four here.

First, material and social circumstances can make it difficult to experience spontaneous freedom by undermining the material security that allows people to experience spontaneous freedom in fulfilling and sustainable ways. To see how material precarity might interfere with robust and joyful experiences of spontaneous freedom without foreclosing such experiences altogether, consider the non-fictional story of Mohammad Ashraf, an impoverished day labourer from Delhi told in Aman Sethi’s book, *A Free Man* (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

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<sup>15</sup> To give a less far-fetched example, racist or sexist ideologies may also directly undermine spontaneous freedom when they cause people to make their plans according to formulaic social scripts. Since norms of race and gender arise, in substantial part, from the uncoordinated decisions of many independent actors, readers who believe that for something to count as a *plan* it must be traceable to an individual or a group with formal decision-making procedures will disagree with this claim. But such readers might still agree that racism and sexism can interfere with spontaneous freedom more indirectly, as discussed below.

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 spontaneous freedom to find a degree of pleasure in circumstances of deprivation and oppression. Ashraf’s case shares with the case of Peter that, in some sense, he has ‘nothing to lose’. Ashraf has nothing to lose because he has so little to begin with, whereas Peter is sufficiently well off that a few hours of spontaneity is unlikely to negatively affect his long-term wellbeing. This is not to suggest that Ashraf’s poverty makes him free, or that he has any reason to embrace the totality of his social circumstances; nonetheless, his life is enriched by embracing the limited opportunities for spontaneous freedom that these circumstances afford.<sup>16</sup>

Ashraf’s story suggests that a yearning for spontaneous freedom is a widespread feature of human life, not just something sought by the wealthy once their other needs have been met. But the possibility of discovering spontaneous freedom in terrible circumstances does not mean that this is likely. Most people are likely to respond to the sort of precarity and uncertainty that Ashraf faces with fear, anxiety, or a sense of alienation, although there is ample room for individual and cultural variation here. Even those, like Ashraf, who manage to find moments of spontaneous freedom in dire poverty are likely to enjoy more restricted forms of spontaneous freedom than those who are better off, and to arrive at spontaneous freedom only by sacrificing other goods. Ashraf says that

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<sup>16</sup> As David Enoch has pointed out, ‘voluntarily opting for the best of the bad available options may serve as consent to that-option-rather-than-the-others, but not to that set of options’ (Enoch 2020, 205).

his freedom ‘comes only from solitude’, but for the rich, spontaneous freedom is less likely to require leading an entirely rootless or solitary life. Spontaneous freedom is thus typically more robust, expansive, and joyous for people like Peter Walsh, whose physical safety is not routinely imperilled and who are sufficiently well off that they have little to lose by spending a few days or weeks pursuing a whim. Ashraf’s case illustrates that people who inhabit precarious social and economic circumstances may find their opportunities for spontaneous freedom severely limited in scope, intensity, or duration; may face unappealing trade-offs between spontaneous freedom and other goods; or may find little opportunity for unalienated activity.<sup>17</sup>

Second, it is not only poverty that interferes with the material and social provision and physical safety that robust experiences of spontaneous freedom depend on. Oppressive social norms, too, often thwart the experience of openness in situations that ought to provide low-stakes opportunities for creativity and spontaneity by robbing people of the social security that facilitates such experiences. This can happen, for instance, when implicit threats of violence constrain the gender presentation of non-binary people, when the threat of sexual harassment restricts one’s spontaneity in choosing what sort of outfit to wear to a party (see Kennedy 1992), or when norms of masculinity backed by sanctions of social ostracism restrict the emotional repertoire and expression of men.

Third, oppressive social norms and expectations can also interfere with experiences of spontaneous freedom by alienating people from their own experiences. Consider on this point another character from *Mrs Dalloway* who at times ‘delights’ in being free: Elizabeth

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<sup>17</sup> However, even those in economically secure circumstances, like Walsh, may find their opportunities for spontaneous freedom curtailed insofar as the security of their economic and social position itself depends on their behaving predictably, as countless artistic depictions of the rigidity and conventionality of middle-class suburban life attest. I am grateful to an anonymous referee from *Mind* for raising this point.

Dalloway, Clarissa's teenaged daughter (Woolf 2005, 132).<sup>18</sup> A few hours after Peter's stroll in Trafalgar Square, Elizabeth stands in Victoria Street waiting for a bus:

She thought perhaps she need not go home just yet. It was so nice to be out in the air. So she would get on to an omnibus. And already, even as she stood there, in her very well cut clothes, it was beginning.... People were beginning to compare her to poplar trees, early dawn, hyacinths, fawns, running water, and garden lilies, and it made her life a burden to her, for she so much preferred being left alone to do what she liked in the country, but they would compare her to lilies, and she had to go to parties, and London was so dreary compared with being alone in the country with her father and the dogs.

(Woolf 2005, 131)

As she transitions from girlhood into womanhood, Elizabeth feels herself increasingly pinned down by the objectifying judgments of people who compare her to poplar trees and fawns. This attention to her embodied social presentation tends to shift Elizabeth's mood from a carefree delight in being 'out in the air' to a claustrophobic feeling that her life is 'a burden to her'. Elizabeth feels pinned down by her awareness of how others see her and what they expect her to be—something that she is free from when she is 'alone in the country'. Such judgments are particularly likely to occasion alienation when they align with broader social structures of objectification. Elizabeth finds something particularly onerous and alienating in being made to feel feminine by the sum of the comparisons that she encounters.<sup>19</sup> It becomes more difficult to experience spontaneous freedom when one

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<sup>18</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee from *Ethics* for suggesting this example and some of the language that follows.

<sup>19</sup> For an illuminating discussion of how objectifying judgments can give rise to alienation in the context of slavery such that journeys lose their 'connotation of exploration' and 'excitement of learning the unknown', see Davis 1971, 7-8.

inhabits a social world that tends to alienate one from one's own embodied experience in this way.<sup>20</sup> It is even more difficult to feel free when social judgments about what one is or should be become so salient, ubiquitous, and overwhelming (a poplar! dawn! a hyacinth! a lily!) that it is challenging to even conceive of novel and different ways that one might live.

Because spontaneous freedom requires social and material resources, spontaneous freedom poses a political problem. As we have seen, more equitable access to spontaneous freedom would require widespread social support for childcare and resistance to rigid gender norms. 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 or Mona to experience both freedom and connection. When waged work is necessary for survival and labour markets and employers severely restrict workers' access to leisure time, suspending one's ordinary routines can become risky or impossible. By contrast, a society that met people's basic social and material needs, whether through robust welfare protections or other means, would enable many more people to experience substantial spontaneous freedom more often and more joyfully. But even this might not be enough to help Ahab loosen up a bit; depending on one's diagnosis of Ahab, that might require even deeper social and cultural changes. In any event, it is clear that truly widespread and equitable access to spontaneous freedom would require profound changes in the way we live, work, and care for one another.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> I do not wish to overplay the extent to which the femininity-enforcing judgments of others interfere with Elizabeth's spontaneity. Minutes after the passage quoted above, we find Elizabeth riding on the top deck of a bus, pretending that the bus is a pirate, and feeling 'delighted to be free' (Woolf 2005, 132). In the moment that I am focused on, however, the obstacles posed by judgment and comparison are considerable.

<sup>21</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. The white patriarchal tradition restricts our experiences of the erotic to formulaic sexual routines, but the spontaneity of Lorde's erotic destabilises ideologies of gender and racial oppression by

#### §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 add little to existing philosophical debates about freedom. However, I will argue that the spontaneous freedom that many people desire realises substantial values by enabling paradigmatic forms of artistic creativity, activating our capacity for novelty and originality, and unburdening us of 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). As my discussion in this section will show, the primary locus of the value of spontaneous freedom is in its experience, and some of this value may be realised even by non-veridical experiences of spontaneous freedom. For this reason, much of what I say about the value of spontaneous freedom may also apply to at least some experiences of spontaneous freedom regardless of their veridicality. Nonetheless, like many intentional experiences (the experience of falling in love; the experience of seeing a sequoia), the experience of spontaneous freedom is typically more valuable when it is veridical. For this reason, I continue to focus on veridical experiences of spontaneous freedom in this section.

The value of experiencing spontaneous freedom comes, in part, from how it allows a certain sort of artistic creativity to flourish. Artistic creativity can take many different forms and can have a wide array of motivations, but 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:

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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, spontaneous freedom might also destabilise architectures of oppression and, like Lorde’s erotic, nourish resistance.

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, Kant thinks that ‘genius’ artists must take themselves not to be merely following a plan.<sup>22</sup> One need not be a Kantian to think that something special happens when art is unplanned. As Benjamin Bagley comments on rock and roll, what is exciting when Keith Richards plays a riff on his guitar ‘is the immediacy—the spontaneity and adventure—of playing without an antecedently fixed end’ (Bagley 2015, 492). Of course, there may be successful art that is not creative, and creativity may take forms that do not involve spontaneous freedom, but a great deal of art, particularly since the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, succeeds by exhibiting creativity<sup>23</sup> and exhibits creativity by manifesting spontaneity.<sup>24</sup>

The connection between spontaneous freedom and artistic creativity helps to illuminate the value of spontaneous freedom outside the context of artistic expression as well. Spontaneous freedom realises what Hannah Arendt calls ‘the capacity of beginning something anew’ (Arendt 1998, 9). We exercise this power to originate when we act in

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<sup>22</sup> The connection of spontaneous freedom to artistic creativity elucidates the further value of veridical experiences of spontaneous freedom as against non-veridical experiences. 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 (see Barnes 2015, 572).

<sup>23</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, eg, Hills & Bird 2019, 710).

<sup>24</sup> Berys Gaut contends that ‘creative activity must have an element of spontaneity’, although he also operates with a narrower understanding of spontaneity than I do, according to which any activity that is not completely planned in advance is at least partly spontaneous (Gaut 2018, 135). Unlike Gaut, I do not wish to claim that *all* creative activity involves spontaneity or spontaneous freedom, but rather take this to be one important way in which art can manifest creativity. For a fuller account of the relationship between spontaneous freedom and artistic creativity, see Gingerich no date-b.

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 think, as Arendt does, that *all* genuine action involves 'inaugurating new processes' to see the value realised by acting in ways that have not already been planned, by others or even by ourselves. To act in such a way is to confirm that we are not trapped by our own personal histories or the human past and that each of us is an inexhaustible source of freshness and novelty. 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, 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), 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 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. Those instances 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 genuinely 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 free will. I contend that 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 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) or would undermine our value and human dignity by casting us as the ‘playthings of external forces’ (Nozick 1983, 291). 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>25</sup> Other compatibilists, less concerned with creativity than Barnes, maintain that we already have all the freedom that is worth wanting

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<sup>25</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).

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, libertarians should be offered a 'vital concession' by compatibilists: 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 libertarians should also offer a 'formal withdrawal' from their metaphysical commitments in exchange for a 'vital concession' from compatibilists: that we should recognise the value of the *sort* of freedom that interests libertarians.

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 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). 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 spontaneous freedom involves feeling not that our activity is uncaused, but that it is unplanned, our activity could be entirely caused by the natural world and its laws and yet still—veridically—be experienced as spontaneously free. The desirability 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 incompatibilist partisans of creativity might object that 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 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 be what we care about when we experience our activity as creative or spontaneously free. For instance, knowing 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.

Libertarian incompatibilists might still contend that in offering up the experience of spontaneous freedom in the stead of incompatibilist freedom, I am not truly proffering a vital concession but rather changing the subject. The incompatibilist may contend that what really matters about originality is *self-creation*.<sup>26</sup> For instance, the libertarian might point to the case of an agent torn between acting to fulfil some moral duty and acting to secure their own benefit, where both options are genuinely open to the agent. This agent might choose to do what duty requires and feel that their activity is dictated by moral duty. Such an agent might be alleged to exercise a radical capacity for self-creation (see Rogers 2015, 9). This agent plausibly satisfies the openness and non-alienation conditions but does not meet the non-obligatoriness condition. Here the libertarian’s idea is that spontaneous freedom is not *necessary* for the creativity that the libertarian wants.

While this objection allows incompatibilists to continue 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

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<sup>26</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee from *Ethics* for pressing this objection.

Ginet 1990, 13-14; Kane 1998, 147). Additionally, judging by the language that incompatibilists use to describe the importance of creativity and originality, spontaneous freedom seems clearly to capture much of what the libertarian wants. The onus is thus on the libertarian to explain what is valuable about objective originality or self-creation, above and beyond those values that are realised in veridical experiences of spontaneous freedom. Why is it important for us to be able to 'self-create' by 'genuinely' choosing from options between which we are torn? Showing that there is some *further* value of creating new beginnings that is realised by incompatibilist freedom but *not* by spontaneous freedom will be a steep hill for libertarians to climb. Moreover, if the argument from creativity is to remain distinct from the argument from moral responsibility, the libertarian must meet this challenge without relying solely on claims about the necessity of underived origination for moral responsibility. 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 rationale for the libertarian's position, since the reason that compatibilist freedom was rejected in the first place was precisely its inability to allow the ethical and aesthetic values associated with creativity to be adequately realised.

At this point, the incompatibilist might have one remaining reservation. The incompatibilist might contend that, while I am not changing the subject, I have not yet shown that veridical experiences of spontaneous freedom are truly compatible with determinism. Once I have claimed that deliberation, plans, and scripts can undermine spontaneous freedom, this objection has it, there is no principled reason to deny that past causes *in general* can undermine spontaneous freedom. In advancing this thought, the incompatibilist might point to manipulation arguments that have been raised against

compatibilists in debates about moral responsibility, such as Derk Pereboom's well-known 'four-case argument' (Pereboom 2001; 2014).<sup>27</sup>

Pereboom's manipulation argument is built around four deterministic cases, in each of which Professor Plum decides to murder White 'for the sake of some personal advantage, and succeeds in doing so' (Pereboom 2014, 75). The aim of the cases is to show that, if determinism is true, Plum cannot be responsible for murdering White. Pereboom varies the factor determining Plum's action, beginning with (1) a case in which a team of neuroscientists directly tamper with Plum's brain to cause him to act, and moving to (2) a case in which the neuroscientists' intervention occurred when Plum was an infant, then to (3) a case in which Plum's actions are determined by 'the training practices of his community' (2014, 78), and finally to (4) a case in which Plum's action is determined by the history of the universe together with the laws of nature. Pereboom argues that, if we consider these four cases, we will see that it is implausible to think that there is a relevant difference between Cases 1 and 2, 2 and 3, or 3 and 4 that would explain why Plum lacks moral responsibility on one case and not the other. Because Case 1 should, Pereboom thinks, elicit a strong intuition that Plum is not morally responsible for his decision to kill White (2014, 77), we should conclude that Plum is not morally responsible for his decision in a deterministic world (2014, 79).

Pereboom's manipulation argument is meant to elicit our intuitions about moral responsibility and the aptness of blame. This argument has been subject to extensive discussion among free will theorists focused on the connection between freedom and moral responsibility.<sup>28</sup> However, an analogous manipulation argument focused on creativity

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<sup>27</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee from *Ethics* for insight on how manipulation arguments bear on my account of spontaneous freedom.

<sup>28</sup> See, eg, Fischer 2004; Mele 2005; McKenna 2008; Haji 2009; and Nelkin 2011.

might be offered in reply to my argument about spontaneous freedom. By analogy to Pereboom's cases, the incompatibilist might advance the following argument, using the case of Peter Walsh's stroll around Trafalgar Square.

**Case C1:** Peter Walsh has been tampered with by a team of neuroscientists who can directly manipulate his neural states at any time. Just as Peter sets off for Trafalgar Square, the neuroscientists push a button that produces a neural state in Peter that results in Peter being causally determined to (a) take the precise route that he takes as he strolls (b) while having the experience of spontaneous freedom and (c) experiencing a pleasant affective state. Although Peter often has experiences of openness, he would not, on this occasion, have experienced spontaneous freedom if the neuroscientists had not pushed the button, nor would he have taken the path that he did when he wandered around Trafalgar Square (cf Pereboom 2014, 76-77).

**Case C2:** Peter Walsh was programmed at the beginning of his life by a team of neuroscientists so that he sometimes, but not always, has experiences of spontaneous freedom, and so that he at times has robust and intense experiences of spontaneous freedom. The team of neuroscientists programmed Peter with the intended consequence that, on this occasion, he is causally determined by his neural state to (a) take the precise route that he takes as he strolls (b) while having the experience of spontaneous freedom and (c) experiencing a pleasant affective state. The neural realisation of Peter's affective states, deliberation, and decisions about where to stroll are exactly the same as in C1; only their causal histories are different (cf Pereboom 2014, 77).



**Case C3:** Peter Walsh is an ordinary human being, and ‘the training practices of his community’ (Pereboom 2014, 78) causally determine the nature of his deliberative processes and affective states so that he sometimes, but not always, has experiences of spontaneous freedom, and so that he at times has robust and intense experiences of spontaneous freedom. This training occurred before Peter developed the ability to prevent or alter these training practices. As a result of this training, Peter is causally determined by his neural state on this to (a) take the precise route that he takes as he strolls (b) while having the experience of spontaneous freedom and (c) experiencing a pleasant affective state. The neural realisation of Peter’s affective states, deliberation, and decisions about where to stroll are exactly the same as in C1 and C2; only their causal histories are different (cf Pereboom 2014, 7).

**Case C4:** Peter Walsh is an ordinary human being who lives in a deterministic universe, where everything that happens is causally determined by virtue of its past states together with the laws of nature. Peter sometimes, but not always, has experiences of spontaneous freedom, and he at times has robust and intense experiences of spontaneous freedom. On this occasion, he (a) strolls through Trafalgar Square while (b) having the experience of spontaneous freedom and (c) experiencing a pleasant affective state. The neural realisation of Peter’s affective states, deliberation, and decisions about where to stroll are exactly the same as in C1, C2, and C3; only their causal histories are different. (cf Pereboom 2014, 79).

In C1, it seems intuitively clear that, although Peter’s action might satisfy standard compatibilist conditions on freedom—and however much he may be morally responsible for his behaviour—his stroll is not creative or original. If a story described Peter as the character in C1, a reader would judge Peter to be deluded in feeling himself to be doing

something spontaneous as he walked around London. But in C2, the incompatibilist might go on to say, there is no principled reason to think that Peter is being any more creative or original than in C1, even though his action is more temporally removed from the neuroscientists' manipulation; the amount of time that passes between the programming and Peter's experience seems irrelevant to the degree of his originality. Moreover, in C3, the incompatibilist contends, Peter's situation is sufficiently similar to his situation in C2 that the burden is on the compatibilist to point to a feature of Peter's circumstances that would explain why he experiences genuine originality in C3 but not in C2, and it seems that there is no such feature; thus we must conclude that in C3 as well Peter is missing out on the freshness and novelty that we might hope freedom would provide. Finally, pointing to C4, the incompatibilist might again insist that this no principled way to distinguish between C4 and C3 that would justify attributing originality to Peter in one case but not the other. And yet, on my account, Peter's experience of spontaneous freedom counts as full and veridical, at least in C4. Thus, the incompatibilist might conclude, Peter must be missing out on the freedom of freshness and in some important sense in a deterministic world, even if he enjoys a fully veridical experience of spontaneous freedom in my sense.

To overcome these lingering reservations, the incompatibilist must be offered some good reason to think that Peter *does* experience genuine creativity and originality in C1, or some good reason to think that the slide to determinism can be stopped somewhere along the way to C4. If no such reason can be offered, the incompatibilist is likely to think that I have omitted a crucial condition for veridical experiences of spontaneous freedom: the falsity of determinism.

I agree that Peter's experience lacks creativity and originality in C1. However, I do not think that the manipulation argument should convince the incompatibilist to look for more or better creativity and originality than what comes with spontaneous freedom,

because I think that the slide that the incompatibilist is worried about can be stopped between C2 and C3.

Recall that, given the account of spontaneous freedom I have provided, Peter would veridically experience spontaneous freedom in circumstances like those of C3 and C4, but not in circumstances like those of C1 and C2. In C1 and C2, what Peter does is planned by the team of neuroscientists, who have drawn up a script that they want Peter to follow in advance of his arrival in Trafalgar Square. The neuroscientists intervene, in both cases, with the aim of ensuring that Peter take the precise route that he takes as he strolls and that, at the same time, he has the first-personal experience of spontaneous freedom. This straightforwardly runs afoul of the openness condition for veridical experiences of spontaneous freedom. In C3, on the other hand, although community training practices causally determine how Peter's stroll will go, there is no individual planning agent, nor even any corporate planning body, that scripts the route that he will follow.<sup>29</sup> Of course, merely pointing out that Peter is spontaneously free in C3 but not in C2 does not, by itself,

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<sup>29</sup> In making this observation about C3, I recognise that I am trading on an intuition about the nature of plans that might not be universally shared. As noted above in §3, I think that ideologies of race and sex, even when not intended by any specific individual agent or corporate body, can directly interfere with the veridicality of experiences of spontaneous freedom when their dictates become sufficiently constrictive and script-like, such as by specifying in advance a sufficiently narrow range of ways in which one can, eg, 'be a man'. But I take C3 to be a case that lacks any salient social script that is predicably connected to the specific path that Peter ends up following. However, even readers who think that there is such a plan in C3 are likely to agree with me that no such plan is present in C4, since even if, as I think, plans can emerge without being intended by an individual agent or corporate body, agents must be involved in *some* way in the creation of a plan, and there is certainly no such involvement of agents in C4. Thus, I invite readers who feel that a plan of some sort is present in C3 to read the discussion that follows as an explanation of the difference between C3 and C4 rather than between C2 and C3. For the purposes of my reply to the manipulation argument, this works just as well, since I need only to show that there is a principled difference either between C2 and C3 *or* C3 and C4. (Of course, religious libertarian incompatibilists for whom God is a planning agent who plots out the entire history of the universe may think that plans are present even in C4. Such a theistic approach is not, however, interested in generating a naturalistically plausible account of free will in the way that the incompatibilists with whom I am engaged in this essay are, so I set aside this complication.)

establish the normative significance of the difference between the two cases. Why is this a *relevant* difference when it comes to freedom and originality?

I contend that if we look more closely at our intuitions about the manipulation cases, we will see that the presence of plans in C1 and C2 better explains the absence of genuine originality than does Peter's causal determination. We can grasp this point first by considering how a character like Peter might react to circumstances like those of C1 and C2. An agent in Peter's position who discovered that a team of neuroscientists had planned out their precise path would likely feel all the spontaneity had drained out of their action. Likewise, anyone who read about a character like the Peter of C1 and C2 would likely feel that the character was deluded, trapped in an illusion of freshness without getting any of the real thing. Compare this to our likely intuitions about C3. Discovering that one had been 'programmed' by one's community at large to have experiences like Peter's produces very different reactions than discovering that one had been programmed by a team of neuroscientist who wanted you to follow a certain definite route. As Michael McKenna has pointed out, someone who believes that one's life 'should not be squandered' and 'should be lived to its fullest, with no promise of a long future or a lovely afterlife' (McKenna 2008, 156), and who comes to realise that this set of values was causally determined by an early childhood experience of the deterioration and death of a parent, is unlikely to feel that they are unfree when they act upon these values. If a novel presented Peter as the character in C3, with much of the novel dedicated to filling in the details of his early life so that the reader could see how his openness to spontaneity emerged from early childhood experiences that he did not choose, the reader would not think him deluded in the way that he would be in C2. Instead, he would simply appear to have been fortunate to have an upbringing that prepared him to revel in such experiences. Likewise, if the Peter of C3 undertook psychoanalysis and discovered that his disposition to have experiences of spontaneous freedom originated in his relationship with his community before he reached

an age of reason, or in his parents' successful attempts to cultivate his capacity for creativity as a child, we would not expect him to feel taken aback or alienated in the way that the Peter of C2 would be upon learning about the team of neuroscientists. Indeed, a social world in which nearly everyone regularly had experiences like Peter's would signal, not the reign of universal determinism, but the arrival of political utopia.

Is there anything further to be said to vindicate this difference in our intuitions about cases C2 and C3? We may be near the point at which our intuitions about freedom become inarticulate, but I think there is at least one further point worth noting. When I act in ways that arise from the deep well of my unstructured values, commitments, and identities, rather than acting according to consciously transparent plans that I have already set in motion, I confirm to myself that my life is, or can be, more and different than what I now take it to be. Audre Lorde writes of 'deep places' of possibility within the self that are 'dark because they are ancient and hidden' where black women hold 'an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling' (Lorde 1984, 32). Likewise, acting in a way that is traceable to a social tradition composed of contestable values rather than rigid scripts, can confirm to me that my life individually, as well as human life collectively, can be more and different than what humanity now takes human life to be. The value of such activity depends not on it originating in the 'self' rather than the 'other', but on its being undirected rather than directed. When our activity arises from sources of influence that are inchoate or even opaque to us, but from which we are not alienated, what we do can be new and surprising from our own individual standpoint, as well as from the standpoint of humanity, even if not *sub specie aeternitatis*.<sup>30</sup>

In circumstances like those of C3, we may find no escape either from the natural history of the universe or from human influence in particular. But we can nonetheless find

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<sup>30</sup> I am grateful to Francey Russell for discussion of this idea.

in ourselves an ability to transcend existing understandings of how our life individually, and human life collectively, might go. By contrast, actors like Peter in C1 and C2 lack the capacity for this sort of transcendence. In C1 and C2, a very specific course of action—the path of Peter’s stroll on a particular June day—is scripted by the planners. As discussed in §2, the more specific a plan is, the more it drains the planned experience of its spontaneous character. When one’s activity is the product of scripts or highly specific intentions that have already been set in motion, there is no room for one’s activity to originate something new to human life, even leaving aside the question of whether one’s activity could originate something new to the impersonal universe.

For these reasons, the salient factor that distinguishes C1 and C2 from C3 and C4 is that, in C3 and C4, what Peter does is not determined by a plan. This is precisely the sort of principled difference that the advocate of the manipulation argument has asked for, since even while (veridically) experiencing his activities as the result of the influence of his community, the Peter of C3 and C4 can still have the valuable experience of acting in ways that are surprising to himself and to humanity. The reason that Peter’s activity lacks creativity in C1 and C2 is thus not that his activity is causally determined but that his relationship to the *human* past is one of rote repetition. Since we have before us a *prima facie* intelligible account of the difference between C2 and C3, the burden shifts at this point back onto the incompatibilist to show why it is more plausible to think that causal determination provides a better explanation of our intuitions about C1 and C2.

I note here that one may accept the reply that I have offered here to the creativity-focused version of the manipulation argument while also accepting Pereboom’s manipulation argument focused on moral responsibility. The concern that motivates Pereboom’s argument is about the justifiability of blaming and punishing people, and what is to be avoided is blaming or punishing an innocent person. As Susan Wolf has noted in developing her ‘asymmetrical’ view of freedom, we have stronger reason to want acts of

blame and punishment to be justified than acts of praise and similar acts that typically cause pleasure rather than pain (Wolf 1980, 155-56).<sup>31</sup> When we transpose a manipulation argument from a context where we worry about blaming people to a context where we worry about freshness and novelty, where we typically care not whether someone ‘fundamentally deserves’ creativity but instead care simply whether they *have* it, the argument looks very different. Anyone who is willing to accept that there is more than one thing that we want when we want freedom, and that moralised theories of freedom do not exhaust our concern with freedom, can reject the transposition of manipulation arguments to debates about creativity and originality even if they accept Pereboom’s argument against responsibility-focused compatibilists.

There is a final point that a reluctant incompatibilist might make in response to my argument, which is to note that, as I have described C1–C4, Peter had a subjectively happy and carefree morning in each case. By analogy to Wolf’s asymmetrical theory of freedom, the incompatibilist might suggest that we would be rather more inclined to think that Peter’s activity lacked genuine creativity if we considered versions of C3 and C4 in which he faced rather greater unhappiness. If Peter lived in a stultifying community, rather than one that fostered creativity and originality, discovering that his activity was an expression of his community’s training might well occasion a feeling of alienation. But this does not show that it is causal determination that interferes with meaningful creativity. Rather, it serves as a reminder that, for spontaneous freedom to flourish widely, more than the

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<sup>31</sup> Dana Nelkin has advanced an asymmetrical conception of freedom in response to Pereboom’s manipulation argument, contending that if we considered cases in which Professor Plum did something praiseworthy, rather than something blameworthy, we would be more inclined to judge Plum to be responsible in Pereboom’s Cases 1–3 (Nelkin 2011, 56-57). In reply, Pereboom has contended that, in such cases, Plum would still not ‘fundamentally deserve’ praise but has otherwise agreed with Nelkin’s point on the grounds that ‘because blaming typically causes pain or harm, it must generally be wrong unless it is fundamentally deserved, whereas since praise is far from painful or harmful, it is often morally appropriate beyond cases in which it is fundamentally deserved’ (Pereboom 2014, 102).

openness condition must be satisfied. If Peter lived in a stultifying society but one that did not specifically plan out his life for him, his activity might be able to satisfy the openness condition for spontaneous freedom, but it would still be challenging for him to satisfy the non-alienation condition, since he might plausibly see his community's influence as an alien imposition rather than a source of inspiration. Moreover, the depressive effect of living in such a community might rob Peter of the social and psychic resources that are typically needed to prompt and sustain experiences of spontaneous freedom and to value such experiences (see §3).

For this reason, 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 the necessary conditions for 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 are spontaneously free. For people to access the sorts of creativity and originality that libertarian incompatibilists rightly value, we must secure the social conditions that enable widespread access to spontaneous freedom.<sup>32</sup> Achieving greater freedom does not require eliminating social influence or escaping from natural history. Rather, it requires us to create social conditions that allow more people, more often, to go off script.

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<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Bagley demonstrates how considerations about blame might push us toward a similar conclusion about the positions of compatibilists and incompatibilists in the free will debate, contending that 'incompatibilists are right that any account of responsibility that denies a place for indeterminacy or self-creation is missing something vital' (Bagley 2017, 882). Like Bagley, I think that the compatibilist picture, insofar as it 'denies a place for indeterminacy or self-creation' is 'missing something vital', although my reasons are not to do with blame.



## §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 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>33</sup>

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