

## SPONTANEOUS FREEDOM\*

Jonathan Gingerich

4 May 2022

Forthcoming, *Ethics*

**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. 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.

### I. 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”;<sup>1</sup> by Joni

---

\* I am grateful to Amy Berg, Eric Brown, Caitlin Dolan, Taylor Doran, Julia Driver, John Drummond, Sarah Fine, Andrew Flynn, Jane Friedman, Laura Gillespie, Micha Gläser, Sacha Golob, Juan Carlos Gonzales, Robert Hughes, Brian Hutler, Melissa Hughes, Brian Leiter, Jacques Lezra, Hallie Liberto, Joe Loewenstein, Samantha Matherne, Piera Maurizio, Ronald McIntyre, Eliot Michaelson, Robin Muller, Ethan Nowak, Martha Nussbaum, Lucy O’Brien, David Owens, Emily A. Page, Alexi Patsouras, Charles Petersen, Mike Ridge, Nick Riggle, Regina Rini, Megan Robb, David Rondel, Francey Russell, Irit Samet, Larry Sager, Lauren Schaeffer, Martin Schwab, Sophie Smith, Rob Simpson, Amia Srinivasan, Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, John Tasioulas, Clinton Tolley, Sabine Tsuruda, Leigh Vicens, Jordan Wallace-Wolf, Tamar Weber, Eric Wiland, David Woodruff Smith, Raphael Woolf, Lorenzo Zucca, two anonymous referees at *Mind*, two anonymous referees at *Ethics*, and the editors of *Ethics* for their comments. I am particularly grateful to Taylor Cyr, Daniela Dover, Barbara Herman, Pamela Hieronymi, A.J. Julius, Kevin Lande, Suzanne Love, Jordan MacKenzie, Thi Nguyen, Calvin Normore, Massimo Renzo, Nick Schwieterman, and Seana Shiffrin for extensive comments on multiple drafts. I am grateful to audiences at the King’s College London Philosophy Department, Southwest Seminar in Continental Philosophy at CSU Northridge, St. Louis Ethics Workshop, UCLA Ethics Workshop, UC Merced Horizons of Phenomenology Conference, and Vancouver Summer Philosophy Conference for engaging discussions of this essay.

<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman, “Song of the Open Road,” in *Leaves of Grass* (Boston: James R Osgood and Company, 1881), 120-29, 120.

Mitchell when she sings, “We love our lovin’ / But not like we love our freedom”;<sup>2</sup> and by Philip Larkin when he speaks of “free bloody birds” going “down the long slide / To happiness, endlessly.”<sup>3</sup> 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>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Joni Mitchell, “Help Me,” track 2 on *Court and Spark*, Asylum Records, 1974.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Larkin, “High Windows,” in *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 129.

<sup>4</sup> Some moral philosophers regard freedom as a matter of the internal configuration of a person’s mind or attitudes. Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Others regard it as a relationship among people, consisting in the absence of social or political domination, Ann E. Cudd, “Wanting Freedom,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 43, no. 4 (2012): 367-85; Philip Pettit, “Freedom as Antipower,” *Ethics* 106, no. 3 (1996): 576-604, or the provision of sufficient resources for individuals to exercise choice effectively, Joel Feinberg, “Legal Paternalism,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (1971): 105-24; Gerald Dworkin, “Paternalism,” *Monist* 56, no. 1 (1972): 64-84; Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 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, Carolina Sartorio, “Causation and Freedom,” *Journal of Philosophy* 109, no. 11 (2012): 629-51, or to control our actions, John Martin Fischer, *Deep Control: Essays on Free Will and Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 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. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 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 Raymond Geuss, “Freedom as an Ideal,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 69 (1995): 87-112, and on freedom as involving uncertainty about the future, see Michael Garnett, “Freedom and Unpredictability,” *Inquiry* 56, no. 6 (2013): 666-80; Patrick Suppes, “The Nature and Measurement of Freedom,” *Social Choice and Welfare* 13, no. 2 (1995): 183-200. Ethicists and political philosophers also occasionally celebrate spontaneity in the context of discussions of personal autonomy without explicitly theorizing spontaneity or directly connecting it to a

In this essay, I begin to remedy the philosophical neglect of spontaneous freedom, characterizing its nature and making a case for its value. In Parts II and III, 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 moralized portrayals of freedom, my account of spontaneous freedom allows that, in certain circumstances, spontaneous freedom may be morally dangerous or otherwise undesirable. I argue in Part IV 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.<sup>5</sup> In Parts V and VI I contend that spontaneous freedom can provide all the freshness and novelty that we want without requiring an incompatibilist metaphysics. 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 theorizing 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 delegitimize those practices—then one will likely be drawn to a

---

conception of freedom. See Ronald Dworkin, *Justice for Hedgehogs*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 199; Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 294.

<sup>5</sup> William Barrett, “Determinism and Novelty,” in *Determinism and Freedom in the Age of Modern Science*, ed. Sidney Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1958), 30-39, 31.

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 lyrics quoted above. I have nothing to say against theories of freedom focused on moral responsibility or the metaphysics of causation.<sup>6</sup> 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, one of which concerns the possibility of genuine spontaneity.<sup>7</sup>

## II. 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.<sup>8</sup> He decided to theorize the oceanic feeling—a “purely subjective fact”—by looking to “the ideational content which is most readily associated” with it.<sup>9</sup> 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.

---

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, everything I say below is, strictly speaking, compatible with all the theories of freedom mentioned in note 1 above.

<sup>7</sup> See Manuel Vargas, “Revisionism about Free Will: A Statement and Defense,” *Philosophical Studies* 144, no. 1 (2009): 45-62, 58-59.

<sup>8</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2010), 24.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

In seeking the ideational content of spontaneous freedom, I will proceed phenomenologically, initially “parenthesizing” ontological questions to focus on the *content* of the experience.<sup>10</sup> Such an approach is attractive here because, in everyday life, people want 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 lover, Daisy Simmons. 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 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

---

<sup>10</sup> See Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1960), 20-21; David Woodruff Smith and Ronald McIntyre, *Husserl and Intentionality: A Study of Mind, Meaning, and Language* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1982) 95-96.

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.<sup>11</sup>

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. 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. 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 activity is not fully settled by prior deliberation and plans.<sup>12</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.<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that Peter's freedom is inconsistent with any of his

---

<sup>11</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, ed. Mark Hussey (Orlando: Harcourt, 2005), 51.

<sup>12</sup> For many, the language of "activity" will suggest a goal-oriented physical process. I mean, instead, to evoke Zeno Vendler's well-known account, which uses "activity" more capaciously for anything we do that "go[es] on in time in a homogenous way." Zeno Vendler, "Verbs and Times," *Philosophical Review* 66, no. 2 (1957), 143-60, 146. This would include such things as sitting on a couch, daydreaming, and even dreaming during sleep. The language of "activity" thus should not be taken suggest a goal-directed or physical process. I am grateful to an editor for *Ethics* for urging me to clarify this point and to Pamela Hieronymi for discussion.

<sup>13</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

larger plans—later in the day, 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 following simple rules to combine parts on an assembly line.<sup>14</sup> 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 channeling 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>15</sup> As he stands in Trafalgar Square, Peter’s life—or, at least, the rest of his afternoon—does not

---

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 decontextualized 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.” Hubert L. Dreyfus, “Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers Can Profit from the Phenomenology of Everyday Experience,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 79, no. 2 (2005): 47-65, 53. Controlling one’s behavior through the sort of intellectualized reflection involved in detached deliberation would be incompatible with spontaneous freedom. Peter is 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>14</sup> Michael Ridge, “Why So Serious? The Nature and Value of Play,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, published ahead of print, August 21, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12826>. Ridge’s account of play as “unscripted activity” that is engaged in “for the fun of it” is congenial to my account of spontaneous freedom. See *ibid.*, 7. However, I depart from Ridge in that I think that an activity can be instinctual without thereby being scripted.

<sup>15</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 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 reflective 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 stroll in Trafalgar Square is not only unscripted and unplanned, he 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.<sup>16</sup> 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*

---

<sup>16</sup> See David Owens, “Habitual Agency,” in *Normativity and Control* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 169-89, 173.

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.** Peter is *unalienated* from his experience of spontaneous freedom, at least in the sense that he does not experience his activity as having its source in something alien to him. Although Peter’s stroll 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 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.<sup>17</sup> 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 characterized 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>18</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.” But 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 he regards these desires as “external” to his self, and whether or not he has reflected upon and endorsed them, the

---

<sup>17</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 168.

<sup>18</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee for *Ethics* for urging this clarification.

sense of “delight” that he feels as he walks suggests that he at least implicitly embraces them as his own.

**Non-obligatoriness.** Peter’s stroll is not just uncertain, unplanned, and unalienated, he also does not experience it as obligatory, in the sense that what Peter does is not dictated by his explicit or implicit beliefs about what other people, the law, or substantive moral duties demand. It may be possible for some bohemian outlaw figure to find spontaneous freedom by abandoning his family and heading to Tahiti for the sake of his art.<sup>19</sup> But for most of us, obligations like a lunch appointment or needing to pick the kids up from school are likely to interfere with the experience 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 temporary social 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.”<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> See Bernard Williams, “Moral Luck,” in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 20-39, 22-23.

<sup>20</sup> The degree to which a given feeling of obligation interferes with the experience of spontaneous freedom may depend on how one understands the scope of that obligation. For someone committed to hosting good parties for their allergic friends, vacuuming up the cat hair beforehand will feel obligatory, insofar as it is necessary to make their allergic guests comfortable. They might nonetheless experience spontaneous freedom while vacuuming, so long as this commitment to throwing a hypoallergenic party does not fully dictate *how* to vacuum (perhaps they can dance while vacuuming). Moreover, even activity that one regards as obligatory with respect to a given end (like throwing parties) may inherit a derivative sense of non-obligatoriness if one regards throwing parties itself as non-obligatory. In this case, everything one must do to throw a good party might inherit a sense of spontaneous freedom from the fact that one has spontaneously chosen to have a party. For discussion of the phenomenon of actions inheriting some of the characteristics of the ends within which they are nested, see C. Thi Nguyen, “Games and the Art of Agency,” *Philosophical Review* 128, no. 4 (2019): 423-62, 443.

**Intentionality.** Peter's experience of spontaneous freedom has intentional content, in that it is *about* or *directed at* features of the world. This means that such experiences 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 scripted things 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. (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>21</sup>) This feature of the openness condition is part of what gives spontaneous freedom potential political import, since we

---

<sup>21</sup> A fuller discussion of the reasons that veridicality adds value to experiences of spontaneous freedom is provided in the context of the free will debate in Part VI below, where I explain the value of being able to veridically experience our activities as the result of some kinds of cause rather than others. I owe this way of putting the point to an anonymous referee for *Ethics*.

need the forbearance of others to have fully veridical experiences of openness and therefore of spontaneous freedom.<sup>22</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. 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 affects that are 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 open road. But spontaneous freedom can also arise from more ambivalent affective states such as boredom. In Agnès Varda’s film *Vagabond*, the protagonist Mona abandons her middle-class comforts in favor of a life of vagrancy.<sup>23</sup> Discontent with the drudgery of office work has apparently driven Mona to wander around Languedoc with her tent on her back,

---

<sup>22</sup> To say whether Peter’s experience of spontaneous freedom as presented by Woolf is veridical would require knowing more about Peter’s psychology and his social context than the novel makes available.

<sup>23</sup> Agnès Varda, *Vagabond* (New York: Criterion Collection, 2000), DVD, 105 minutes.

not knowing where she will sleep this night or the next. 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."<sup>24</sup> Approach orientations activate "a broad, global style of thought, which facilitates being open to new experiences and encourages finding novel associations."<sup>25</sup> Such orientations can stem either from positive affective states such as elation, or from negative ones such as boredom.<sup>26</sup>

**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 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

---

<sup>24</sup> Karen Gasper and Brianna L. Middlewood, "Approaching Novel Thoughts: Understanding Why Elation and Boredom Promote Associative Thought More than Distress and Relaxation," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 52, no. 3 (2014): 50-57, 50.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>26</sup> See Vida Yao, "Boredom and the Divided Mind," *Res Philosophica* 92, no. 4 (2015): 937-57.

my day off?). As the scope of spontaneous freedom narrows, it may eventually dwindle to insignificance (What will I do in the five minutes between my lectures?).

One noteworthy aspect of spontaneous freedom's scope variation concerns the sorts of activities 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.<sup>27</sup> Sartre, for instance, comments on the distinctive way people apprehend themselves as free when they slide across snow on skis.<sup>28</sup> 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 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>29</sup> It is one thing to quit my job, move to New Zealand, and start a band after an hour's thought; it is

---

<sup>27</sup> Experiences of spontaneous freedom can be prompted by activities such as these, but it can also prompt us to engage in further activities: going skiing might occasion an experience of spontaneous freedom, but the experience of spontaneous freedom might also lead one to take to the slopes so as to have an experience of bodily movement commensurate with one's psychological sense of expansiveness and freedom.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Sarah Richmond (New York: Washington Square Press, 2018), 757-59.

<sup>29</sup> I am grateful to Seth Yalcin for this formulation.

quite another to spend an hour deliberating before deciding to spend my Saturday 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 for people to whom the label "free spirit" might be more readily applied, such as Varda's Mona, a footloose period might last for months or years. Of course, experiencing intense spontaneous freedom at every moment of one's life would be ethically undesirable, even if it were psychologically possible. Indeed, there are dangers associated with any significantly temporally extended experience of spontaneous freedom. These dangers are illustrated by Varda's ambiguous and conflicted portrayal of Mona. In Varda's words, *Vagabond* is a film about "freedom and dirt" and aims to depict a character who "live[s] out [her] freedom in a wild and solitary way."<sup>30</sup> 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 recognize something deeply attractive in Mona's freedom, which Mona herself also 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.

To recapitulate, to experience spontaneous freedom is to experience one's activity as unplanned, unscripted, non-obligatory, and one'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. It can accompany a

---

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Chris Darke, "Vagabond: Freedom and Dirt," *The Criterion Collection*, January 21, 2008, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/501-vagabond-freedom-and-dirt>.

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, e.g., fun, adventure, creativity, relaxation, relief at escaping unpleasant obligations, daydreaming, mind-wandering, thoughtless routine, and even restless anxiety. As with all human experiences, our experiences of openness 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>31</sup>

### III. 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. In distinguishing “internal” and “external” factors in this Part, 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.

---

<sup>31</sup> I am grateful to Thomas Pink for this example.

We sometimes arrive at spontaneous freedom by roughly psychological means—for instance, through meditation, prayer, reflection, or self-examination.<sup>32</sup> 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 a 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.”<sup>33</sup> 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, external influences seem to foster, or even to prompt, experiences of spontaneous freedom. 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>34</sup>

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

---

<sup>32</sup> For a description of prayer as a secular activity that can occasion the transformation of oneself and one’s relationships, see Kristin Dombek, “Letter from Williamsburg,” *The Paris Review* 205 (Summer 2013), <https://www.theparisreview.org/letters-essays/6236/letter-from-williamsburg-kristin-dombek>.

<sup>33</sup> Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 53.

<sup>34</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee for *Ethics* for suggesting this line of thought. For discussion of how psychedelics may contribute to ‘dismantling’ ‘automated and rigid’ brain behaviors, see Robin Carhart-Harris et al., “Neural Correlates of the LSD Experience Revealed by Multimodal Neuroimaging,” *PNAS* 113, no. 17 (2016): 4853-58.

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 impeded by a psychology that resists or fears experiences of openness or that is encumbered by undue feelings of obligation or by overly rigid goals. Consider, for instance, Captain Ahab of *Moby Dick*. Despite 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.<sup>35</sup> 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 subscribed to a fully "directive" view of morality, which regarded every single action that I took as dictated by moral duty, I would be left with no "breathing room" to feel that the future of my life was not fixed.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, people who suffer from severe dissociative disorders that leave them feeling persistently alienated from their own activity may find themselves incapable of

---

<sup>35</sup> See Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 187-92. Similarly, people who are highly resistant to letting other people influence or change them may be unable to approach conversations as opportunities for spontaneous freedom. See Daniela Dover, "The Conversational Self," *Mind* 131, no. 521 (2022), 193-230, 208-09.

<sup>36</sup> Seana Shiffrin, "Moral Autonomy and Agent-Centered Options," *Analysis* 51, no. 4 (1991): 244-54, 249.

experiencing spontaneous freedom.<sup>37</sup> 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. External obstacles can undermine spontaneous freedom *directly* by undermining the veridicality of the openness condition. As we have seen, if Peter Walsh were in fact controlled by an evil genius as described above, his experience of spontaneous freedom could not be veridical. 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 I will discuss momentarily.

External obstacles can also undermine experiences of freedom *indirectly*, by interfering with the actualization of the psychological dispositions and capacities that allow people to experience spontaneous freedom, or to find joy in such experiences. This can happen in many 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

---

<sup>37</sup> See Anne P. DePrince, Rafaële J.C. Huntjens, and Martin J. Dorahy, "Alienation Appraisals Distinguish Adults Diagnosed with DID from PTSD," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 7, no. 6 (2015): 578-82.

without foreclosing such experiences altogether, consider the non-fictional story of Mohammad Ashraf, an impoverished day laborer from Delhi, told in Aman Sethi's book, *A Free Man*.<sup>38</sup> Ashraf works for a few weeks or months at a time on dangerous construction projects, then takes his earnings and spends them on food and alcohol until he runs out. 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."<sup>39</sup> Ashraf strategically seeks spontaneous freedom to find a degree of pleasure in circumstances of deprivation and oppression. Like Peter, Ashraf feels that he has "nothing to lose" by pursuing his experience of spontaneous freedom—although for Ashraf, this is because he has so little to begin with, whereas for Peter, it is because he has so much. 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>40</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

---

<sup>38</sup> Aman Sethi, *A Free Man: A True Story of Life and Death in Delhi* (Noida: Random House India, 2011).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>40</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." David Enoch, "False Consciousness for Liberals, Part I: Consent, Autonomy, and Adaptive Preferences," *Philosophical Review* 129, no. 2 (2020): 159-210, 205.

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.<sup>41</sup> Ashraf says that 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 expansive and joyous for people like Peter Walsh, whose physical safety is not routinely imperiled 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 and who lack physical, economic, or social safety 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 at all.<sup>42</sup>

Second, it is not only poverty that interferes with valuable experiences of spontaneous freedom. 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

---

<sup>41</sup> For a discussion of ways in which the everyday reality of poverty is often one of endless planning, see Esther Duflo, “Human Values and the Design of the Fight against Poverty,” Tanner Lectures, Harvard University, May 3, 2012, available at <https://economics.mit.edu/files/16598>.

<sup>42</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.

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, or when norms of masculinity backed by sanctions of social ostracism restrict the emotional repertoire and expression of men.<sup>43</sup>

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 Dalloway, Clarissa's teenaged daughter.<sup>44</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.<sup>45</sup>

As she transitions from girlhood into womanhood, Elizabeth is increasingly subject to 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

---

<sup>43</sup> The effects of rigid social norms on experiences of spontaneous freedom are complex. As an anonymous editor for *Ethics* pointed out to me, "social norms are important not only because they constrain us, but because they give us a way to express ourselves as part of a social world, to be legible, [and] to try on new identities." For these reasons, while social norms can interfere with experiences of spontaneous freedom, they can also help to enable them. Indeed, it can be difficult to experience spontaneous freedom when one is in a strange context in which one does not know how one is expected to behave.

<sup>44</sup> Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 132. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for *Ethics* for suggesting this example and some of the language that follows.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

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>46</sup> It becomes more difficult to experience spontaneous freedom when one inhabits a social world that tends to alienate one from one’s own embodied experience in this way.<sup>47</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.<sup>48</sup>

Because spontaneous freedom requires material, social, and cultural 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 labor markets 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

---

<sup>46</sup> For an illuminating discussion of how such objectifying judgments can give rise to even more extreme forms of alienation in the context of slavery, such that life loses its “connotation of exploration” and “excitement of learning the unknown,” see Angela Y. Davis, *Lectures on Liberation* (New York: Committee to Free Angela Davis, 1971), 7-8.

<sup>47</sup> For discussion of how beauty norms can give rise to experiences of bodily alienation, see Céline Leboeuf, “Anatomy of the Thigh Gap,” *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (2019): 1-22.

<sup>48</sup> I do not wish to overplay the extent to which the femininity-enforcing judgments of others quash 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, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 132.

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, truly widespread and equitable access to spontaneous freedom would clearly require profound changes in the way we live, work, and care for one another.<sup>49</sup>

#### IV. SPONTANEOUS FREEDOM, CREATIVITY, AND CONSOLATION

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 realizes important values by enabling paradigmatic forms of artistic creativity, activating our capacity for novelty and originality, and unburdening us of the feeling that we are fully identified with our reflective, deliberative capacities. Although, as I have acknowledged, certain instantiations of spontaneous freedom may be morally dangerous, spontaneous freedom can nonetheless form part of a compelling ethical ideal.<sup>50</sup> As my discussion in this Part will show, the primary locus of the value of spontaneous freedom is

---

<sup>49</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." Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 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 destabilizes ideologies of gender and racial oppression by refusing these scripts. Insofar as spontaneous freedom similarly involves breaking out of habitual and routine forms of deference and hierarchy, it might also help to destabilize architectures of oppression and, like Lorde's erotic, nourish resistance. For a recent, illuminating discussion of Lorde's conception of the erotic, see Caleb Ward, "Feeling, Knowledge, Self-Preservation: Audre Lorde's Oppositional Agency and Some Implications for Ethics," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 6, no. 4 (2020): 463-82.

<sup>50</sup> See Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," in *The Variety of Values: Essays on Morality, Meaning, and Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 11-30.

in its experience, and some of this value may be realized even by non-veridical experiences of spontaneous freedom.<sup>51</sup> 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 Part.

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.<sup>52</sup> For Kant, the “primary characteristic” of artistic genius is originality: genius requires creating in a manner that is unprecedented in conceptual thought and that is “entirely opposed to the spirit of imitation.”<sup>53</sup> 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. 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.”<sup>54</sup> There may be successful

---

<sup>51</sup> For a fuller discussion of why this is so, see Part VI below.

<sup>52</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5:307.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:307-08.

<sup>54</sup> Benjamin Bagley, “Loving Someone in Particular,” *Ethics* 125, no. 2 (2015): 477-507, 492. For a related discussion of improvisation in dance, see Carla Bagnoli, “The Springs of Action in Butō Improvisation,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Improvisation in the Arts*, ed. Alessandro Bertinetto and Marcello Ruta (London: Routledge, 2021), 488-501.

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 and exhibits creativity by manifesting spontaneity.<sup>55</sup>

The connection between spontaneous freedom and artistic creativity also helps to illuminate the value of spontaneous freedom outside the special context of artistic expression. Spontaneous freedom realizes what Hannah Arendt calls “the capacity of beginning something anew.”<sup>56</sup> We exercise this power to originate when we act in ways that do not simply execute previously made decisions. According to Arendt’s distinctive philosophy of action, all free action has the character of “startling unexpectedness,” of something that “cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before.”<sup>57</sup> Action for Arendt involves “inaugurating new processes in the world that, while not coming from nowhere, can nevertheless be unpredictable, unprecedented, and surprising.”<sup>58</sup> 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 realized 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

---

<sup>55</sup> Berys Gaut contends that “creative activity must have an element of spontaneity,” although he operates with a broader understanding of spontaneity than I do, according to which any activity that is not completely planned in advance is at least partly spontaneous. Berys Gaut, “The Value of Creativity,” in *Creativity and Philosophy*, ed. Berys Gaut and Matthew Kieran (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 124-39, 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 Jonathan Gingerich, “Kantian Genius Reconstructed” (unpublished manuscript, January 15, 2022).

<sup>56</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>58</sup> Laura McMahan, “Freedom as (Self-) Expression: Natality and the Temporality of Action in Merleau-Ponty and Arendt,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 57, no. 1 (2019): 56-79, 65.

trapped by our own personal histories or the human past, that each of us is a 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 allows us to exercise a power that may be as deeply central to being human as is the capacity for rational deliberation.

In addition to realizing our power for novelty and creation, spontaneous freedom promotes more receptive capacities as well. Much as Nietzsche thinks that classical Greek tragedy allowed its audience to experience a temporary dissolution of selfhood,<sup>59</sup> spontaneous freedom can provide a feeling of relief at finding that we are not exhausted by our individual, rational, deliberative, reflective 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, reflecting, and deliberating. Interestingly, such relief can be occasioned both by spontaneous freedom and by habit, for both allow our activity to flow from deep and unstructured commitments without the mediation of an introspectively transparent plan. This 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.<sup>60</sup>

Some forms of spontaneous freedom are, of course, more valuable than others. We might have—at most—a tepid experience of spontaneous freedom while surveying the endless avenues of breakfast cereals that lie open before us at the grocery store. But unless

---

<sup>59</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), § 17.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, § 8.

we are inane, the experiences of spontaneous freedom that we have when we make art or converse with friends will shine more brightly than the freedom of the supermarket.<sup>61</sup>

Those instances of spontaneous freedom associated with a richer horizon of possibility or characterized by a high degree of intensity or an extended duration will tend to realize 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.

## V. SPONTANEOUS FREEDOM AND FREE WILL

In this Part, I argue that appreciating the value of spontaneous freedom and its socio-political character affords insight into philosophical debates about free will.<sup>62</sup> The problem of free will in contemporary philosophy 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.”<sup>63</sup> This incompatibilist demand for creativity maintains that any sort of freedom that could exist if determinism were true

---

<sup>61</sup> In sufficiently constrained choice environments, such as when one is faced with a small number of options or a binary choice, it may be nearly impossible to experience spontaneous freedom because we will feel able, and consequently under pressure, to deliberately evaluate each of the options from an intellectualized standpoint and act according to that evaluation. Cf. Dreyfus, “Overcoming the Myth of the Mental.” Thus, much as autonomy requires ‘an adequate range of options to choose from’ for Joseph Raz, experiences of spontaneous freedom may only be possible when one is faced with a sufficiently large set of options. Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 374. This is one respect in which my account of spontaneous freedom departs from existentialist accounts, which often emphasize the possibility of self-creation in the context of binary choices. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 30-31.

<sup>62</sup> Readers who have no interest in debates between compatibilism and incompatibilism may safely skip ahead to Part VI.

<sup>63</sup> W.S. Anglin, *Free Will and the Christian Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 14.

would lack the sparkle of freshness and originality that true freedom requires<sup>64</sup> or would undermine our value and human dignity by casting us as the “playthings of external forces.”<sup>65</sup> 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.<sup>66</sup>

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.”<sup>67</sup> 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>68</sup> Other compatibilists, less concerned with creativity than Barnes, maintain that we already have all the freedom that is worth wanting so long as we are “in control of ourselves, and not under the control of others.”<sup>69</sup> For Harry

---

<sup>64</sup> Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 81; Barrett, ‘Determinism and Novelty,’ 31.

<sup>65</sup> Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 291.

<sup>66</sup> Randolph Clarke, *Libertarian Accounts of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 111.

<sup>67</sup> Eric Christian Barnes, “Freedom, Creativity, and Manipulation,” *Noûs* 49, no. 3 (2015): 560-88, 583.

<sup>68</sup> Other compatibilists, like Maria Kronfeldner, theorize 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. Maria E. Kronfeldner, “Creativity Naturalized,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 59, no. 237 (2009): 577-92, 592.

<sup>69</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), 169.

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.”<sup>70</sup>

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.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, Strawson suggests that in exchange for a “formal withdrawal” from their metaphysical commitments, compatibilists should offer a “vital concession” to libertarians: an acknowledgment that our moral practices cannot be justified by a straightforward utilitarian calculus but must be vindicated according to standards internal to the practices themselves.<sup>72</sup>

Strawson focuses on moral practices and attitudes, rather than on creativity or originality. In what follows, I argue that in the domain of concerns about originality, as well, libertarians should consider a “formal withdrawal” from their metaphysical commitments in exchange for a “vital concession” from compatibilists: that is, a full recognition of the value of the *sort* of freedom that interests libertarians. Recognizing the value of spontaneous freedom amounts to such a concession, I argue, since incompatibilists concerned with originality are ultimately moved by the same considerations that cause many people to yearn for spontaneous freedom.

---

<sup>70</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, *Taking Ourselves Seriously and Getting It Right*, ed. Debra Satz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 15-16.

<sup>71</sup> P.F. Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Routledge, 2008), 1-28.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

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 should appeal to libertarians worried about the specter of a “stale and routine world from which surprise and genuine novelty may ultimately be banished.”<sup>73</sup> Indeed, spontaneous freedom more fully realizes the values embodied in the libertarian desire for freshness than does the freedom from manipulation offered by compatibilists like Barnes, since 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”<sup>74</sup> but also from the control of the agent’s own prior plans. Spontaneous freedom thus satisfies the libertarian’s sense that free agents must not be “stifle[d] with boredom” in a way that bare freedom from manipulation does not.<sup>75</sup>

However, because spontaneous freedom involves feeling not that our activity is uncaused, but that it is *unplanned*, our activity could be entirely determined by the laws of nature and yet still—veridically—be experienced as spontaneously free. For 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. 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. Furthermore, a metaphysical thesis like determinism cannot allow for “compromise, borderline-style answers”: if determinism were true, it would hold of all people, always and everywhere.<sup>76</sup> Whereas, as we have seen, spontaneous freedom comes in degrees of scope,

---

<sup>73</sup> Barrett, “Determinism and Novelty,” 32.

<sup>74</sup> Barnes, “Freedom, Creativity, and Manipulation,” 566.

<sup>75</sup> Barrett, “Determinism and Novelty,” 31.

<sup>76</sup> Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” 21.

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. Moreover, while nothing we do can affect the truth or falsity of determinism, spontaneous freedom is something that we can consciously cultivate (or inhibit) as we shape our psychic and political lives. Insofar as spontaneous freedom already realizes 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 consider a “formal withdrawal” from their metaphysical commitments.

Libertarian incompatibilist partisans of creativity 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 might claim that genuine novelty requires that my actions introduce value that “was not presaged by or already fully counted” in the world’s previous instrumental value.<sup>77</sup> Or, the incompatibilist may contend that what really matters about originality is self-creation.<sup>78</sup> Both of these responses insist that the phenomenology of freedom is orthogonal to the metaphysical problem of free will.

However, this insistence comes at a cost, since many incompatibilists see appeals to phenomenology as an important means of making progress on the intractable dispute with compatibilists.<sup>79</sup> Since spontaneous freedom seems to capture much of what the libertarian wants at the level of phenomenology, the onus is on the libertarian to explain what is valuable about *objective* originality or self-creation, above and beyond the values realized in veridical experiences of spontaneous freedom. Showing that there is some *further* value of

---

<sup>77</sup> Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, 311.

<sup>78</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee for *Ethics* for pressing this objection.

<sup>79</sup> See, e.g., Carl Ginet, *On Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 13-14; Kane, *The Significance of Free Will*, 147.

creating new beginnings realized by incompatibilist freedom but *not* by spontaneous freedom will be a steep hill for libertarians to climb.

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 original rationale for the libertarian's position, since the reason that compatibilist freedom was rejected in the first place was precisely its inability to accommodate the ethical and aesthetic values associated with creativity.

At this point, the incompatibilist might contend that I still have not shown that veridical experiences of spontaneous freedom are *truly* compatible with determinism. Once I have allowed 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."<sup>80</sup>

Pereboom's manipulation argument is built around four cases, in each of which Professor Plum decides to murder White "for the sake of some personal advantage, and succeeds in doing so."<sup>81</sup> 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 tampers with Plum's brain to cause him to act, and moving to (2) a case in which the neuroscientists'

---

<sup>80</sup> Derk Pereboom, *Living without Free Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Derk Pereboom, *Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). I am grateful to an anonymous referee for *Ethics* for insight on how manipulation arguments bear on my account of spontaneous freedom.

<sup>81</sup> Pereboom, *Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life*, 75.

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," 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.<sup>82</sup> Pereboom argues 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 in 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,<sup>83</sup> we should conclude that Plum is also not morally responsible for his decision in the deterministic world of Case 4.<sup>84</sup>

Pereboom's argument, which has attracted extensive discussion among free will theorists,<sup>85</sup> is meant to elicit our intuitions about moral responsibility and the aptness of blame. However, an analogous manipulation argument focused instead on creativity might be offered in reply to my argument about spontaneous freedom, invoking the following four variations on Peter Walsh's stroll.

**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 he sets off for Trafalgar Square, the neuroscientists push a button to produce a neural state that results in Peter being causally determined to (a)

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>85</sup> See John Martin Fischer, "Responsibility and Manipulation," *Journal of Ethics* 8, no. 2 (2004): 145-77; Alfred R. Mele, "A Critique of Pereboom's 'Four-Case Argument' for Incompatibilism," *Analysis* 65, no. 1 (2005): 75-80; Michael McKenna, "A Hard-Line Reply to Pereboom's Four-Case Manipulation Argument," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 77, no. 1 (2008): 142-59; Ishtiyaque Haji, *Incompatibilism's Allure: Principal Arguments for Incompatibilism* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2009); Dana Nelkin, *Making Sense of Freedom and Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

take the precise route that he takes as he strolls (b) while having the experience of spontaneous freedom and (c) experiencing a pleasant, approach-oriented affective state. Although Peter often has experiences of spontaneous freedom, and sometimes has robust and intense experiences of spontaneous freedom, he would not, on this occasion, have had an experience of 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.<sup>86</sup>

**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 intended, and actual, consequences identical to those in C1. The neural realization 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.<sup>87</sup>

**Case C3:** Peter Walsh is an ordinary human being, and "the training practices of his community" 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

---

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Pereboom, *Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life*, 76-77.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 77.

occasion with actual (though not necessarily intended) consequences identical to those in C1 and C2. Again, the neural realization of his affective states, deliberation, and decisions about where to stroll are exactly the same as in C1 and C2; only their causal histories are different.<sup>88</sup>

**Case C4:** Peter Walsh is an ordinary human being who lives in a deterministic universe, where everything that happens is causally determined by 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, approach-oriented affective state. The neural realization 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.<sup>89</sup>

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 behavior—his stroll is not creative or original. This intuition threatens to generate an analogue to the original manipulation argument's slide from allowing that freedom is compromised in C1 to being forced to conclude that it is compromised in C4. For—the incompatibilist might say—there is no principled reason to think that Peter is any more creative or original in C2 than he is in C1 simply because his actions are further temporally removed from the neuroscientists' manipulation. The same apparent lack of a principled distinction holds between C2 and C3, and between C3 and C4. And yet, on the account that

---

<sup>88</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 78.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 79.

I have given, Peter's experience of spontaneous freedom should count as full and veridical, at least in C4. Thus, unless I can identify either some principled reason to think that Peter *does* experience genuine creativity and originality in C1, or some principled way to stop the slide to determinism somewhere along the way between C1 and C4, we will have to conclude that Peter is missing out on the freedom of freshness in some important sense in a deterministic world, even if he enjoys a fully veridical experience of spontaneous freedom.

I agree that Peter's experience lacks creativity and originality in C1. However, 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. 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.

Merely pointing out that Peter qualifies, on my account, as spontaneously free in C3 but not in C2 does not, by itself, establish the normative significance of this difference. Why is this a *relevant* difference when it comes to the forms of novelty and creativity that both I and the incompatibilist care about? I contend that if we look more closely at our intuitions about the manipulation cases, we will see that the presence of plans better explains the absence of genuine originality in C1 and C2 than does causal determination as such. An agent in Peter's position who discovered that a team of neuroscientists had planned out their precise path would likely feel that 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, but would not have the same reaction to reading about the Peter of C3 or C4.

These intuitions provide us with an initial basis for drawing a line between C2 and C3. Part VI will make the case that this difference in intuitions reflects a principled distinction of the sort that the incompatibilist proponent of the manipulation argument seeks. In marking this distinction between C2 and C3, I recognize that I am trading on an intuition about the nature of plans that might not be universally shared. As noted above in Part III, I think that racist and sexist ideologies, for example, 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, e.g., “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 consciously intended by any specific individual agent or corporate body, agents must be involved in *some* way in the creation of a plan, and there is no such agential involvement in C4. 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 show that there is a principled difference *either* between C2 and C3 *or* between C3 and C4.<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> 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 here are, so I set this complication aside.

Notice also that one may accept the reply that I offer here to the creativity-focused version of the manipulation argument while still accepting the original, moral-responsibility-focused version. The concern that motivates Pereboom's original argument is about the justifiability of blaming and punishing people; what is to be avoided is blaming or punishing an innocent person. But, 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 other acts that typically cause pleasure rather than pain).<sup>91</sup> When we transpose manipulation arguments from a context where we worry about blaming innocent people to a context where we worry about foreclosing freshness and novelty, where what we care about is not whether someone "fundamentally deserves" creativity but instead 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, more specifically, that concerns about moral responsibility do not exhaust our concern with freedom—can thus reject the transposition of manipulation arguments to debates about creativity and originality, even if they accept Pereboom's argument against responsibility-focused compatibilists.

## VI. CREATIVITY AND THE VALUE OF UNPLANNED ACTIVITY

In Part V, I argued that my account of spontaneous freedom lends support to compatibilists in the free will debate because it offers a reply to incompatibilists who insist

---

<sup>91</sup> Susan Wolf, "Asymmetrical Freedom," *Journal of Philosophy* 77, no. 3 (1980): 151-66, 155-56; see also Nelkin, *Making Sense of Freedom and Responsibility*, 56-57. Replying to Dana Nelkin's asymmetrical conception of freedom, Pereboom himself concedes 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. Although Pereboom contends that, in such cases, Plum would still not "fundamentally deserve" praise, he otherwise agrees 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, *Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life*, 102.

that a deterministic universe could not afford the sort of novelty and creativity that an indeterministic world could. I argued that veridical experiences of spontaneous freedom provide just the sort of freedom that the creativity-focused incompatibilist is looking for, while requiring only the absence of plans and scripts rather than the absence of causal determination. Manipulation arguments pose a challenge for my claim: what, they ask, is the *principled* difference between two sorts of cases?

- Cases in which Peter Walsh is manipulated—either at the moment he sets off for Trafalgar Square (C1) or when he was an infant (C2)—by a team of neuroscientists to cause him to follow a specific path as he wanders around Westminster while having a subjective experience of spontaneous freedom, and
- Cases in which Peter is not programmed by a team of neuroscientists but is nonetheless causally determined, either by the training practices of his community (C3) or by the laws of nature and the history of the universe (C4) to take his subjectively spontaneously free stroll.

Proponents of manipulation arguments claim that there is no principled place to draw a line between these cases and so what explains the absence of freedom in *all* the cases is causal determination. If Peter is unfree in C1, they say, he is also unfree in C4. The task of this Part is to explain more fully why we might hope to act in a way that is unplanned and how this hope differs from the hope that we live in an indeterministic universe.

To begin, consider again our likely intuitions about a case like C3 in which the training practices of Peter's community cause him to take his spontaneous walk. Michael McKenna has pointed out that if someone who believed that life "should be lived to its fullest, with no promise of a long future or a lovely afterlife"<sup>92</sup> came to recognize that this

---

<sup>92</sup> McKenna, "A Hard-Line Reply to Pereboom's Four-Case Manipulation Argument," 156.

commitment was causally determined by an early childhood experience of the death of a parent, they would hardly feel that they were for that reason unfree in acting upon this values. Likewise, if a novel presented Peter as the character in C3, with much of the story dedicated to filling in the details of his parents' successful attempts to cultivate his capacity for creativity as a child, the reader would not think him deluded in the way that he would be in C1 or C2. Instead, he would simply appear to have been fortunate to have had an upbringing that prepared him to revel in such experiences. Similarly, if the Peter of C3 were strongly disposed to experience spontaneous freedom because the values and educational practices of his community successfully fostered citizens capable of genuinely creative thought, we would not expect recognition of this fact to be alienating or disturbing in the way that the Peter of C2 would be disturbed by 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 advent of a political utopia.

Can anything further be said to vindicate the difference in our intuitions about cases of programming by agents and other cases of causal determination? We may be nearing the point at which our intuitions about freedom become inarticulate, but there is 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 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," and which hold "an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling."<sup>93</sup> An analogous point can be made at the social level: action that draws on a

---

<sup>93</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 32. While Lorde celebrates the ability of black women, and especially queer black women, to "tap" the "deep place" of hidden possibility within themselves, *ibid.*, 100, her writing on coalitional politics suggests that this ability is central to living life as a "self-actualized

deeply-rooted cultural tradition composed of inchoate, contestable values, rather than on rigidly articulated scripts, can confirm to me that my life individually, as well as human life collectively, can be more and different than what I, or we, now take them to be. When our activity arises from sources that are mysterious or opaque to us, but from which we nonetheless do not feel alienated, what we do can feel new and surprising from our own individual standpoint, as well as from the standpoint of humanity, even if not *sub specie aeternitatis*. Actions that arise from such an opaque source can amaze and astonish us, regardless of whether they would surprise an omniscient observer.<sup>94</sup> By contrast, actors whose activity is specifically scripted by planners lack this capacity to transcend existing understandings of how their lives individually, and human life collectively, might go.

These reflections suggest that the salient factor that distinguishes the manipulation cases in which Peter is genuinely creative is whether what Peter does is determined by a plan. This is a principled difference between the two sets cases, since even if he (veridically) experienced his activities as caused by the influence of his community or the laws of nature, Peter could still have the valuable experience of acting in ways that are surprising, both to himself and to humanity at large. The reason that Peter's activity lacks creativity in C1 and C2 is not that his activity is causally determined, but that his relationship to the *human* past in these cases is one of rote repetition or enactment. Peter's activity in these cases would add nothing new to our collective understanding of what human life should or could be like, since his activity is already understood and planned by the neuroscientists.<sup>95</sup>

---

human being" for anyone who wishes to engage in political solidarity without losing themselves. Ibid., 137. For helpful discussion of the role of "deep feeling" in Lorde's understanding of coalitional politics, see Ward, "Feeling, Knowledge, Self-Preservation," 472-73.

<sup>94</sup> I am grateful to Francey Russell for discussion of this idea. My discussion of the value of acting from sources that are not transparent to oneself is greatly indebted to as-yet-unpublished work by Russell on the nature and ethical significance of self-opacity.

<sup>95</sup> Some readers may feel that if another person *predicted* Peter's actions with sufficient specificity, regardless of whether anyone *planned* those actions, this prediction alone might rob Peter's activity

As R.E. Hobart observes, “the novelty interesting ... to humanity is the escape from the spell of habit or ease or a straitened mental outlook, the leap of the soul with all its strength in a new direction.”<sup>96</sup>

Since we have before us a *prima facie* intelligible account of the difference between cases of planning by agents and cases of mere causal determination, the burden shifts to the incompatibilist to show why causal determination provides a better explanation of our intuitions than does planning. This will be challenging, since it will require the incompatibilist to argue for the counterintuitive claim that something valuable—indeed, a valuable form of *freedom*—is missing even in a society that reliably produces spontaneous and creative people.

One further aspect of the manipulation argument is worth mentioning here. All of the cases we have discussed are ones in which things go well for Peter: he has a subjectively happy and carefree morning in each case. We might be more inclined to think that Peter’s activity lacked genuine creativity if we considered drearier cases. If Peter lived in a stultifying community, rather than one that fostered creativity and originality, then discovering that his activity arose from his cultural background might indeed occasion a feeling of alienation. But this does not show that it is causal determination, rather than

---

of its originality. Determining the significance of prediction (by others or oneself) for spontaneous freedom would require a fuller exploration of the relationship between planning, prediction, and uncertainty. I offer such an exploration in Jonathan Gingerich, “Freedom beyond Choice” (unpublished manuscript, March 29, 2022). This complication is irrelevant for present purposes, however, since, for considerations about prediction to support the manipulation argument, the incompatibilist must show not only that having another person *actually* predict what I will do can undermine my freedom, but that the mere *in-principle predictability* resulting from my action’s being determined by the history of the universe and the laws of nature would undermine my freedom. But such in-principle predictability does not undermine my ability to act in ways that—because they have not yet *actually* been contemplated—can expand our individual and collective understandings of what human life should or could be like. I am grateful to Massimo Renzo for discussion of this point.

<sup>96</sup> R.E. Hobart, “Free Will as Involving Determination and Inconceivable without It,” *Mind* 43, no. 169 (1934): 1-27, 23.

agential planning, that interferes with meaningful creativity. Instead, it serves as a reminder of the social and political conditions needed for spontaneous freedom to flourish widely. If Peter lived in a stultifying society (but one that did not specifically script his life for him), his activity could still be entirely unplanned, but it would nonetheless be hard for him to experience spontaneous freedom, since he would be more likely to experience his community's norms and values as alienating constraints rather than an inchoate well of inspiration. Moreover, the depressive effects 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.

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: the compatibilist should integrate the importance of creativity into their theory of freedom. Existing compatibilist accounts of the necessary conditions for freedom may vindicate moral responsibility, but they are insufficient to capture 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>97</sup> Achieving greater freedom does not require eliminating cultural influence or escaping natural history, but it

---

<sup>97</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." Benjamin Bagley, "Properly Proleptic Blame," *Ethics* 127, no. 4 (2017): 852-82, 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.

does require us to create a social world that allows more people, more often, to go off script. A fully just political order would provide us with more, and more equitably distributed, opportunities for spontaneous freedom than we have now.<sup>98</sup>

## VII. 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.”<sup>99</sup> 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,” 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.”<sup>100</sup> Frankfurt may be right that “blind rollicking spontaneity is not exactly the hallmark of our species.”<sup>101</sup> But as innumerable pop songs testify, many of us hope for it to be a hallmark of our lives.

---

<sup>98</sup> Integrating the value spontaneous freedom with other politically important values in a comprehensive theory of justice is a task for future research, but for an exploration of how recognizing the value of spontaneous freedom might inform certain concrete legal and political decisions, see Jonathan Gingerich, “Is Spotify Bad for Democracy? Artificial Intelligence, Cultural Democracy, and Law,” *Yale Journal of Law and Technology* 23, no. 2 (forthcoming, 2022).

<sup>99</sup> Dennett, *Elbow Room*, 169.

<sup>100</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 22-23.

<sup>101</sup> Frankfurt, *Taking Ourselves Seriously and Getting It Right*, 1.