

Human freedom has been stoutly defended by a distinguished line of thinkers in various traditions, East and West. No voice in its defense has been more persuasive than that of the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, whose vehement pronouncements for freedom arise from his own intense experience of human struggle during the Nazi occupation of France in World War II.

The fashionable notion that we are predetermined in our behavior by past experiences – by “operant conditioning” – to the point of losing our free will – this, for Sartre, is an outrageous fallacy. On the contrary, man is not merely responsible for what he does, but he is even responsible for all that he is.

Sartre is convinced that there is no determinism of any kind. *Nothing* tells me what to do. I myself decide. I cannot blame God, or others, or my past environment. I am – now – what I make myself to be. I have to accept the consequences of my own freedom, take the responsibility for my decisions and face the consequences thereof. For human freedom, as Sartre sees it, is not always a blessing; it is more often a tragedy. Whether we like it or not, *man is condemned to be free.*

But why does Sartre speak of our being “condemned” to freedom? Why such a gloomy term? Shouldn’t freedom be a joyous thing? Sartre’s position is that freedom carries with it an unavoidable anguish when we fully realize how overwhelming the implications of our freedom can be. It entails tragic choices with formidable consequences. Out of our freedom we do not make decisions for ourselves alone, but for others, and sometimes for all mankind. To realize completely what this means can be a nightmarish insight into the very nature of human existence.

To be free means to be caught in a paradox. We are forever dissatisfied with existence as we know it. But to live means to dream a million dreams and forge ahead to catch the fullness of our being. Indeed, each mortal man wants to be God, but the truer fact is that we are finite and our limitations are crushing. Still, they are unacceptable. So we continue to compete and strive, dreaming our dreams, even though they are futile dreams, and even though we know it.

Why? Why do we do all this? Simply because we cannot do otherwise. For to exist is to be free, and to be free is to act, to take initiative, to make choices and decisions, to dream impossible dreams – however unreachable they are – and to fail. In a word, we must *try to do* what we already know we *cannot do.*

Sartre is attempting to get us to see that we exist in an antinomian world without guidelines. Cultural norms are relative, and societies are humorlessly absurd. There is no God and therefore no absolute mandates to give life order. There is no meaning to human life as such. Nor is there any past conditioning which we can blame for making us what we are. There is not even a “human nature” which might help us to define ourselves.

There is nothing to help us – because the moment we become conscious of what we are, then we become responsible for everything we are and do. Of course, we can join the mob and let our passions collectively carry us along, but *we make the decision* to do so, and we are responsible for that decision. We can conform to society’s whims, or follow an irrelevant, legalistic ethical code, or accede to peer pressures; but in each instance *we make the decision* to do so, and we must accept the responsibility for that decision.

Whenever we are conscious, therefore, we are responsible. For at the cutting edge of consciousness, we are truly free. At each moment of the living present, we have an infinite number of choices before us, ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving – the options are numberless, so many that to feel them fully is to become overwhelmed by them. It’s at this moment of revelation that we frequently retreat into the myths of determinism. We convince ourselves that we move within carefully defined and unbreakable limits, and that we are not really free. Yet, from behind our safe parameters we will *claim* to be free. We are “not supposed” to think, feel, or do certain things, or so we are told by society, church, friends, laws, conscience. But all these excuses are retreats from freedom; and the true fact is that we can do all of them. But since experience of such freedom is fraught with fear, we eagerly accept all the fashionable limitations.

Jean-Paul Sartre penned a now-famous passage about the experiences of the French Resistance movement against the Nazis in France:

We were never more free than during the German occupation. We had lost all our rights, beginning with the right to talk. Every day we were insulted to our faces and had to take it in silence. Under one pretext or another, as workers, Jews, or political prisoners, we were deported *en masse*. Everywhere, on billboards, in the newspapers, on the screen, we encountered the revolting and insipid picture of ourselves that our suppressors wanted us to accept. And because of all this we were free. Because the Nazi venom seeped into our thoughts, every accurate thought was a conquest. Because an all-powerful police tried to force us to hold our tongues, every work took on the value of a declaration of principles. Because we were hunted down, every one of our gestures had the weight of a solemn commitment...

Exile captivity, and especially death (which we usually shrink from facing at all in happier days) became for us the habitual objects of our concern. We learned that they were neither inevitable accidents, nor even constant and inevitable dangers, but they must be considered as our lot itself, our destiny, the profound source of our reality as men. At every instant we lived up to the full sense of this commonplace little phrase; "Man is mortal!" And the choice that each of us made of his life was an authentic choice because it was made face to face with death, because it could always have been expressed in these terms: "Rather death than..." And here I am not speaking of the elite among us who were real Resistant, but of all Frenchmen who, at every hour of the night and day throughout four years, answered *No*.

The essential freedom, the ultimate and final freedom that cannot be taken from a man, is to say *No*. This is the basic premise in Sartre's view of human freedom: freedom is in its very essence negative, though this negativity is also creative. At a certain moment, perhaps, the drug or the pain inflicted by the torturer may make the victim lose consciousness, and he will confess. But so long as he retains the lucidity of consciousness, however tiny the area of action possible for him, he can still say in his own mind: *No*. Consciousness and freedom are thus given together. Only if consciousness is blotted out can man be deprived of this residual freedom. Where all the avenues of action are blocked for a man, this freedom may seem a tiny and unimportant thing; but it is in fact total and absolute, and Sartre is right to insist upon it as such for it affords man his final dignity, that of being man.

William Barrett

"Let [the child] believe that he is always in control, though it is always you [the teacher] who really controls. There is no subjugation as perfect as that which keeps the appearance of freedom, for in that way one captures volition itself" Rousseau

"What is an obstacle for me may not be so for another. There is no obstacle in an absolute sense...Human-reality everywhere encounters resistance and obstacles which it has not created, but these resistances and obstacles have meaning only in and through the free choice which human-reality is."
Jean-Paul Sartre

"Existentialism's first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him." Jean-Paul Sartre