5.5 SARTRE'S PROFOUND FREEDOM
- Understand Sartre's existentialist freedom.
- Explain his notion of "existence precedes essence."
- Evaluate his idea of radical freedom.

5.1 OVERVIEW: THE FREE WILL PROBLEM

Few things in life are more valuable to us than freedom. We want it, we demand it, we say we cannot live without it. We yearn for and expect social or political freedom, the freedom to go where we want, say what we please, and do as we may within broad legal and social limits. But we also want—and usually assume we have—a more profound kind of freedom, what philosophers call free will. This type of freedom is the power of self-determination: If we possess it, then at least some of our choices are not decided for us or forced upon us but are *up to us*. If we don't possess it, our social and political freedoms would seem to be considerably less valuable. If our actions are not our own because, say, someone has brainwashed or drugged us to control how we vote, then being free to vote would seem to be an empty liberty. So the central question in free will debates is whether we in fact have this more fundamental form of freedom.

The question arises because, as in many other issues in philosophy, two of our basic beliefs about ourselves and the world seem to conflict. On one hand, we tend to think we have free will in the sense just described. On the other, we also usually assume that every event has a cause. Or, as philosophers would say, we accept **determinism**, the doctrine that every event is determined or necessitated by preceding events and the laws of nature. Determinism says that all events—including our choices and actions—are produced inexorably by previous events, which are caused by still earlier events, which are caused by still others, the chain of causes leading back into the indefinite past. Since every cause always results in the same effect, the future can unfold in only one way. Everything that happens *must happen* in an unalterable, preset fashion. But if determinism is true, how can any

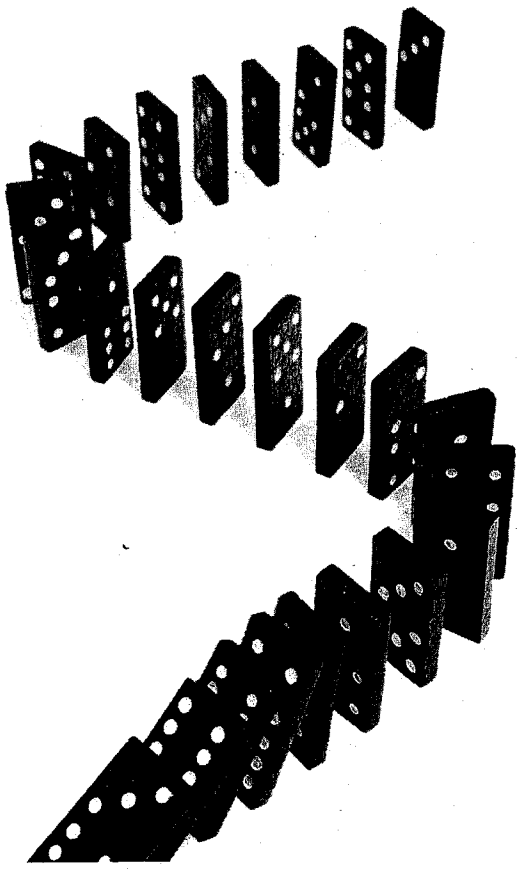

Figure 5.1 Are all of our actions produced by a chain of events that stretches back into the indefinite past?

Determinism is the doctrine that every event is determined by preceding events and the laws of nature.

You must believe in free will; there is no choice.
—Isaac Bashevis Singer

The **problem of free will** is the challenge of reconciling determinism with our intuitions or ideas about personal freedom.

1 Are you bothered by the thought of a rigidly determined existence? Does the idea that all your actions are determined disturb you—or reassure you?

choices we make or any actions we perform be up to us? How can we do anything "of our own free will"? If determinism is true, your reading this book right now was caused by prior events such as certain states in your brain, body, and environment, and these events were in turn caused by still others, and the causal sequence must stretch back countless years to a time before you existed. You had no say in the movement or direction of this causal train, no control over how it went. Your reading this book right now could not have turned out any other way. You could not have done otherwise. How, then, could your actions be free?

From this conflict comes the **problem of free will**—the challenge of reconciling determinism with our intuitions or ideas about personal freedom. The problem seems all the sharper because both horns of this apparent dilemma are endorsed by common sense. In our lives we recognize the work of deterministic forces: Every cause does seem to regularly and lawfully produce an effect, and every effect seems to have a cause. Baseballs obey gravity, bread nourishes, fire burns, electronics work, human bodies are shaped by genetics, and human personalities are molded by experience. All this is reinforced by science, which tirelessly traces the universe's myriad links between cause and effect. Our everyday experience also suggests that sometimes it is indeed up to us how we choose and act, and that we could have chosen and acted otherwise than we did.

But who cares whether all our actions are determined by forces beyond our control? Well, we do. Most of us are unsettled by the thought that our choices and actions may not be our own, that everything we do is inevitable, preset, or necessary. This fear of a predetermined existence is reflected in movies, books, and popular culture. In the films *Gattaca*, *A Clockwork Orange*, and *The Truman Show*, deterministic forces in various guises are part of what makes these movies so disturbing. The novel *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley shows us a futuristic society of contented citizens who are happy with their lot in life—but only because social engineers manipulate and dampen the people's desires with a mind-numbing drug called *soma*. B. F. Skinner's novel *Walden II* depicts another community of happy folk who want only what they can readily acquire or achieve. They are perfectly satisfied with their lives because they have been programmed through lifelong behavioral conditioning (the kind that Skinner himself advocated) to desire only what is attainable. Skinner portrays his vision as a utopia, but many think it is a dystopia in which social freedom is a reality but free will is nonexistent.

People also care about the issue of free will because upon it hang momentous questions about moral responsibility, legal punishment, praise and blame, and social and political control. If our actions are not free in any important sense, it is difficult to see how we could be held morally responsible for what we do. If our actions are fully determined, how could we be legitimately subjected to punishment, praise, or blame for our actions? Punishing us for something we did would be like penalizing us for having red hair or brown eyes. As you might expect, many who reject the notion of free will think that punishing people for crimes makes no sense. Instead of punishing criminals, they say, we should try to modify their behavior. Instead of imprisoning or executing them, we should train them through behavioral conditioning and other techniques to be law-abiding.

Men are deceived if they think themselves free, an opinion which consists only in this, that they are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined.
—Baruch Spinoza

The issues of determinism and free will often come up in court when someone is being tried for a serious crime such as rape or murder. The defense attorney argues that the defendant is not responsible for his actions, for his character was warped by abusive parents, an impoverished or brutal environment, or bad genes. His life was programmed—determined—to turn out a certain way, and he had no say in any of it. The prosecutor insists that despite the influence of these factors, the defendant deserves most of the blame for his crime because ultimately he acted freely. The jury then must decide where determinism ends and free will begins.

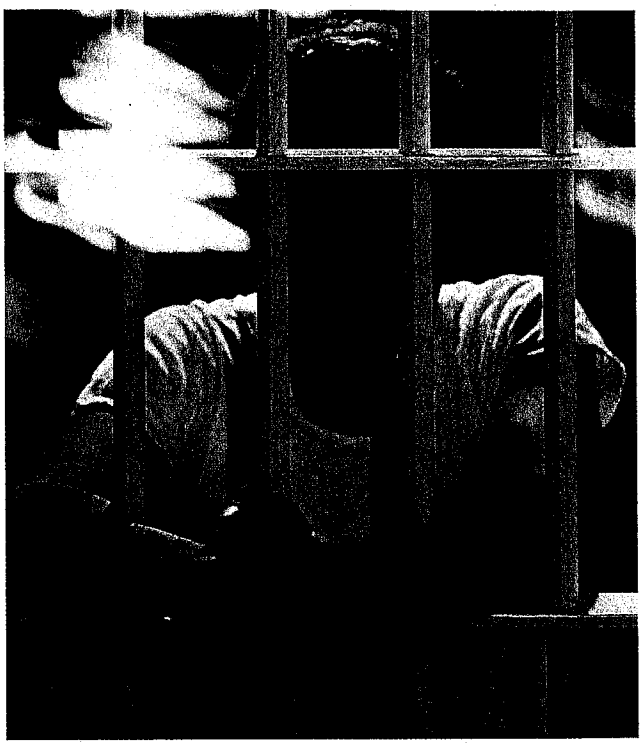

Figure 5.2 A teenager on death row, 1986. To many, if determinism is true, criminals should not be punished, just trained. Does this way of dealing with criminals make sense to you?

Philosophers both ancient and modern have proposed three solutions to the free will problem. The first is known as **hard determinism**, the view that no one has free will. Hard determinists accept these three propositions: (1) determinism is true; (2) determinism and free will are incompatible; and (3) we never act freely. Proposition 2 is a statement of the doctrine of **incompatibilism**: Determinism and free will are incompatible doctrines; they both cannot be true. That is, if every event is determined, there can be no free will; if free will exists, determinism cannot be actual. Hard determinists argue that given the truth of determinism and the truth of incompatibilism, the assertion of free will must be false.

To support Proposition 1, determinists typically appeal to the deliverances of science. They point out that scientific research in many fields, from astrophysics to zoology, is forever uncovering causal connections, seeming to confirm a deterministic picture of the world. Scientists now know that human behavior is shaped to a remarkable degree by heredity, the brain's biochemistry, behavioral conditioning, and evolution. All these facts reinforce the notion that human choices and actions are brought about deterministically.

Hard determinism is the view that free will does not exist, that no one acts freely.

Incompatibilism is the view that if determinism is true, no one can act freely.

Strangely enough, science—specifically quantum physics—has also provided evidence that determinism is false. Or, to put it another way, some scientific evidence supports **indeterminism**, the view that not every event is determined by preceding events and the laws of nature. The standard view among quantum physicists is that many events on the quantum level (the domain of subatomic particles) are uncaused. Among philosophers, however, debate still continues over what this quantum indeterminacy means for the problem of free will.

Indeterminism is the view that not every event is determined by preceding events and the laws of nature.

The second proposed solution to the free will problem is **compatibilism**, or soft determinism. Compatibilists believe that (1) determinism is true; (2) determinism and free will are compatible; and (3) we sometimes act freely. So compatibilism claims that although determinism is true, our actions can still be free because

Compatibilism is the view that although determinism is true, our actions can still be free.

Life is like a game of cards. The hand you are dealt is determinism; the way you play it is free will.
—Jawaharlal Nehru

2 How would a personal belief in determinism affect your view of crime and punishment? Do you think that people are generally responsible for their crimes, or are they not responsible due to deterministic forces beyond their control?

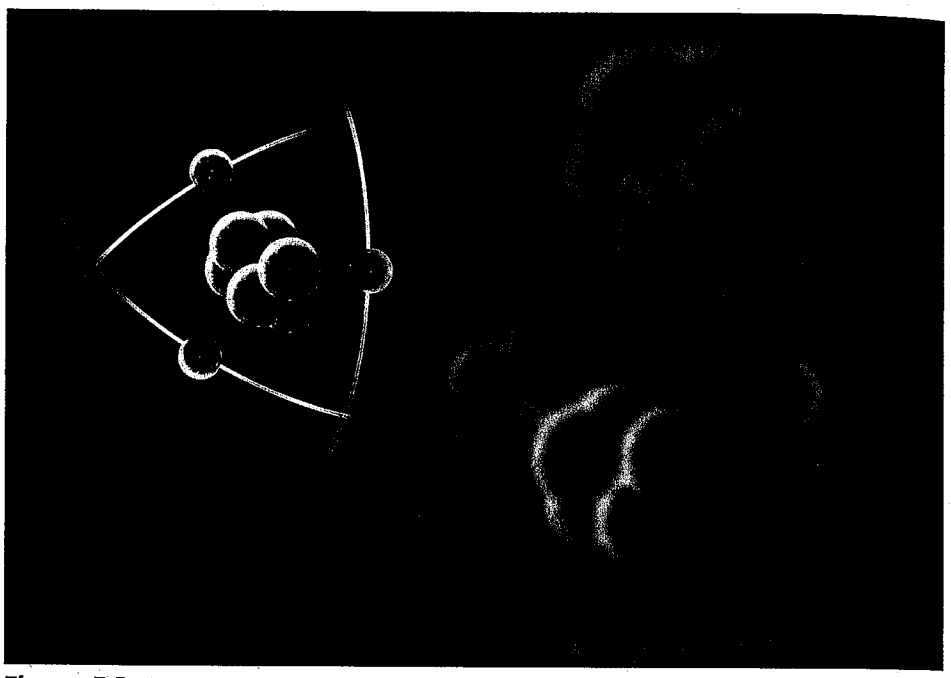

Figure 5.3 Physicists think that some events on the quantum level are uncaused. Does this mean that some events on the macro level (the level inhabited by rocks, stars, and people) are also uncaused? If so, would this indeterminism give us free will?

One of the annoying things about believing in free will and individual responsibility is the difficulty of finding somebody to blame your problems on. And when you do find somebody, it's remarkable how often his picture turns up on your driver's license.
—P. J. O'Rourke

determinism and free will are not in conflict (incompatibilism is false). It is possible for every event to be caused by preceding events plus the laws of nature—*and* for us to still act freely. But how is such a thing possible?

Traditional compatibilism holds that your action is free if (1) it is caused by your own choices or desires and (2) it is not impeded or constrained by anything. You act in complete freedom when you give money to a charity—*if* you really do want to give your money and *if* nothing prevents you from doing so (for example, no physical obstacles stand in your way, no one is coercing you, and no inner compulsion restrains you). You act freely when you are able to do what you desire to do; you do not act freely when you are not able to do what you desire to do. This would be true, according to traditional compatibilism, even if your desires were themselves determined by forces beyond your control. Your will itself may be determined by preceding events and the laws of nature, but if you are able to do what you will, you act freely. In this way, says the compatibilist, free will is compatible with determinism.

Libertarianism (not political) is the view that some actions are free, for they are caused or controlled by the person or agent.

But some critics reject the compatibilist's notion of freedom. They maintain that merely being able to act according to your desires without constraints is not real freedom *if your desires are determined for you in the first place.*

3 At this point in your reading, which doctrine are you more sympathetic to—hard determinism, compatibilism, or libertarianism?

The third answer to the problem of free will is **libertarianism** (not to be confused with the political doctrine of the same name). It asserts that some actions are free, for they are ultimately caused, or controlled, by the person, or agent. So libertarians believe that (1) determinism is false (indeterminism is true); (2) determinism

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?

Fate

Are you a fatalist? Do you believe that fate rules your life so that your future will unfold in a certain way *regardless of what you do*? Soldiers in battle sometimes take a fatalistic attitude. They say, "If a bullet is meant to kill you, you will die, and there's nothing you can do about it. If a bullet is meant to spare you, you will live no matter what you do. Either way, whatever happens, fate will decide, and there's no point in worrying about it or trying to avoid your destiny." Have you ever had similar thoughts about death, failure, love relationships, or—heaven forbid—final exams?

Fatalism is the view that what will be, will be, and no human actions can change it. It says that any actions you might take to alter your fate are futile. Determinism is different. It says that events happen because of preceding events, but these preceding events can include *things that we do*.

So is fatalism true? Apparently not. It seems obvious that many events happen because our actions help bring them about. Sometimes events occur *because of what we do*, not regardless of what we do. Whether the soldier is killed by the bullet may depend on whether he tries to avoid getting hit.

Do you believe in fate? If so, why? What evidence supports your belief? Why do you think some people take a fatalist view of life?

and free will are incompatible; and (3) we sometimes act freely. They hold that indeterminism is necessary for free will, that free actions can occur only in a world where not all events are determined by prior events and natural laws. Note how libertarianism differs from the other two positions on free will. Both libertarians and hard determinists accept incompatibilism, but they take opposing views on determinism and free action. And, contrary to compatibilists, libertarians reject determinism and embrace incompatibilism.

Like the other free will theories, libertarianism has its detractors. For example, some have objected that it is incoherent, mysterious, or both. They ask, How can an agent cause event A when there is no previous event B in the agent that causes event A, and no prior event C that causes event B, and so on? Because libertarians accept indeterminism, they are committed to denying such a causal sequence. But explaining how free will is possible while rejecting deterministic causal chains has been a challenge for libertarians, and some of their solutions have provoked considerable skepticism.

WRITING TO UNDERSTAND: CRITIQUING PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS Section 5.1

1. Does science really show that determinism is true? Why or why not?
2. Does quantum indeterminacy prove that determinism is false (that indeterminism is true)? Some philosophers say that the breakdown of determinism on the quantum level isn't relevant to the free will issue, because the indeterminacy is confined mostly to subatomic particles and generally doesn't affect human actions. Do you agree? Explain.
3. Do you believe that the compatibilist's concept of free will is plausible? If you were free to act on any of your desires but your desires were controlled by God, would you have free will?
4. Suppose hard determinism were true. Would that mean we are not responsible for our actions? If hard determinism did make responsibility impossible, would that fact show that the theory is false?
5. Which theory of free will seems to agree best with your own experience of making choices and taking action?

5.2 DETERMINISM AND INDETERMINISM

The hard determinist believes that determinism is a fact about the universe and that incompatibilism is true (that no one can act freely if determinism is true). From these two claims it is a short step to the conclusion that no one acts freely (that libertarianism is false). This line of reasoning (or something close to it) has been around since ancient times, but since the rise of modern science in the seventeenth century it has seemed to some to be much more credible because determinism itself has seemed more credible. Baron d'Holbach (1723–1789), a prominent philosopher of the French Enlightenment, has given us one of the clearest and boldest statements of the hard determinist position:

Baron d'Holbach, "Of the System of Man's Free Agency"

It has been already sufficiently proved that the soul is nothing more than the body considered relatively to some of its functions more concealed than others: it has been shown that this soul, even when it shall be supposed immaterial, is continually modified conjointly with the body, is submitted to all its motion, and that without this it would remain inert and dead; that, consequently, it is subjected to the influence of those material and physical causes which give impulse to the body; of which the mode of existence, whether habitual or transitory, depends upon the material elements by which it is surrounded,

that form its texture, constitute its temperament, enter into it by means of the aliments, and penetrate it by their subtility. The faculties which are called *intellectual*, and those qualities which are styled *moral*, have been explained in a manner purely physical and natural. In the last place it has been demonstrated that all the ideas, all the systems, all the affections, all the opinions, whether true or false, which man forms to himself, are to be attributed to his physical and material senses. Thus man is a being purely physical; in whatever manner he is considered, he is connected to universal nature, and submitted to the necessary and immutable laws that she imposes on all the beings she contains, according to their peculiar essences or to the respective properties with which, without consulting them, she endows each particular species. Man's life is a line that nature commands him to describe upon the surface of the earth, without his ever being able to swerve from it, even for an instant. He is born without his own consent; his organization does in nowise depend upon himself; his ideas come to him involuntarily; his habits are in the power of those who cause him to contract them; he is unceasingly modified by causes, whether visible or concealed, over which he has no control, which necessarily regulate his mode of existence, give the hue to his way of thinking, and determine his manner of acting. He is good or bad, happy or miserable, wise or foolish, reasonable or irrational, without his will being for any thing in these various states. Nevertheless, in despite of the shackles by which he is bound, it is pretended he is a free agent, or that independent of the causes by which he is moved, he determines his own will, and regulates his own condition.[1]

A man is the origin of his action.
—Aristotle

To d'Holbach and other Enlightenment thinkers, the theories and discoveries of science were robust proof that every event was determined by preceding events and natural laws. They saw the universe as a grand, intricate, physical machine, with every part—including human beings—predetermined to operate in foreordained fashion. In such a universe, they insisted, free actions are impossible. Free will is an illusion. We think we are free only because we are ignorant of the forces that bind us.

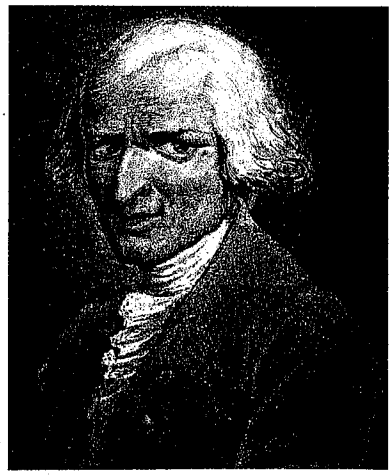

Figure 5.4 Baron d'Holbach (1723–1789).

Since d'Holbach's day, many others have taken the findings of science to be undeniable evidence for universal determinism. After all, science has had—and continues to have—remarkable success in explaining and predicting all sorts of natural phenomena, including the choices and actions of human beings. In light of this success, many people believe that the truth of determinism is simply obvious. Nowadays, most who accept determinism are compatibilists, but a few of them see no reason to think free will is compatible with determinism, so they take the hard determinist view.

Yet in an ironic turn of scientific history, reasons to doubt determinism have come from science itself. Quantum physics provides a surprising counterexample to the notion that every event has a cause. The most widely accepted view among quantum physicists is that at the subatomic level, some events (such as the decay of radioactive particles) are random and therefore uncaused. If so, it is not the case that every event is determined by preceding events and the laws of nature, and the central premise in the argument for hard determinism is unfounded.

4 Do you believe both that every event has a cause and that free actions are possible? If so, are these beliefs compatible?

Some hard determinists maintain that these uncaused events are mostly confined to the subatomic realm and do not significantly affect the larger world of

PHILOSOPHERS AT WORK

William James

William James (1842–1910) is one of America's most influential philosophers, leaving a lasting impression on debates in epistemology, philosophy of religion, ethics, and free will. He was born in New York City and grew up in an intellectually stimulating family. His father was a philosopher of religion, and his brother Henry was the famous novelist. He studied abroad, earned a Harvard degree in medicine, and spent most of his career lecturing and writing in psychology and philosophy.

Figure 5.5 William James, philosopher, psychologist, pragmatist, and believer in free will.

His reputation as the greatest psychologist of America and Europe was assured by the publication of his voluminous work *The Principles of Psychology* (1890). After that came numerous philosophical essays and books, including *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897); *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902); *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907); and *The Meaning of Truth* (1909).

James is one of the founders of the philosophy of pragmatism, a doctrine about meaning and truth. James is famous for articulating a pragmatic theory of truth, which says that the truth of a statement is a matter of its utility. For James, utility may mean either success in predicting events or promotion of beneficial feelings and actions. Through pragmatism, James came to the conclusion that religion was a legitimate and important aspect of life because we can plausibly accept religious claims on grounds of their utility, regardless of their lack of evidence.

Ironically, James, the famous psychologist, was given to psychosomatic illness and clinical depression. Once while wrestling with the problem of free will, he fell into a devastatingly dark mood and did not recover until he had found a solution. He concluded that despite determinism, we can have free will because chance events make room for free actions.

human actions. This suggests, they say, that for all practical purposes, determinism *is* true. But others reject this view, contending that quantum indeterminism isn't as restricted to the quantum level as some assume, and that therefore causal indeterminism could arise anywhere.

Most indeterminists do not deny that many, perhaps most, of our actions are caused by prior events; they concede that much of human behavior may be causally determined. But they reject the notion that previous events cause *all* our actions; they think that claim is a sweeping generalization that science has yet to demonstrate.

A man can do what he wants, but not want what he wants.
—Arthur Schopenhauer

Long before the advent of quantum physics, there were thinkers who posited indeterminism in the world and argued that it opened the way for humans to have

free will. The "atomist" philosophers of ancient Greece theorized that the world was composed of bits of matter called atoms moving in rigidly determined fashion—except that these objects sometimes "swerved" randomly to allow for undetermined, free actions in humans. Centuries later the distinguished American philosopher William James (1842–1910) argued that indeterminism is a feature of the universe that permits "alternative futures" and the possibility of freedom. It allows some things to happen by chance. Most importantly, James says, it allows free actions, for *free actions are chance happenings.* He explains his view like this:

William James, "The Dilemma of Determinism"

What does determinism profess? . . . It professes that those parts of the universe already laid down absolutely appoint and decree what the other parts shall be. The future has no ambiguous possibilities hidden in its womb: the part we call the present is compatible with only one totality. Any other future complement than the one fixed from eternity is impossible. The whole is in each and every part, and welds it with the rest into an absolute unity, an iron block, in which there can be no equivocation or shadow of turning. . . .

Indeterminism, on the contrary, says that the parts have a certain amount of loose play on one another, so that the laying down of one of them does not necessarily determine what the others shall be. It admits that possibilities may be in excess of actualities, and that things not yet revealed to our knowledge may really in themselves be ambiguous. Of two alternative futures which we conceive, both may now be really possible; and the one become impossible only at the very moment when the other excludes it by becoming real itself. Indeterminism thus denies the world to be one unbending unit of fact. It says there is a certain ultimate pluralism in it; and, so saying, it corroborates our ordinary unsophisticated view of things. To that view, actualities seem to float in a wider sea of possibilities from out of which they are chosen; and, somewhere, indeterminism says, such possibilities exist, and form a part of truth. . . .

Do not all the motives that assail us, all the futures that offer themselves to our choice, spring equally from the soil of the past; and would not either one of them, whether realized through chance or through necessity, the moment it was realized, seem to us to fit that past, and in the completest and most continuous manner to interdigitate with the phenomena already there?[2]

5 How does James's indeterminist view fit with our commonsense notions about punishment and reward?

James holds that a free choice is not determined by previous events; it is uncaused. There is more than one way that the choice can go, and how it goes is a matter of chance. But even though the choice comes about by chance, it will seem to follow from previous events just as a determined choice would.

My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.
—William James

Many have rejected this kind of argument, including those who believe that indeterminism is a prerequisite for free will. The difficulty, they say, is that indeterminism alone does not make for free and responsible actions. Libertarians, for example, agree that indeterminism is necessary for free will, that free actions can occur only in a world where not all actions are determined by prior events and natural laws. But they also point out that if what an agent does happens by chance (that is, randomly),

then she is not free to act or not act. What she does just happens, and she has nothing to do with it. Her actions are not under her control and therefore are not really *her* actions. In fact, they would not be actions at all. An action is an event intended to happen by the agent, but if her intentions have nothing to do with it (because it is random), it is not really an action and is definitely not free. So for libertarians, indeterminism by itself is not enough for free will, which is why they take pains to explain the role of the agent in free actions.

The conclusion libertarians draw from all this is that both determinism and indeterminism can be enemies of free will. Determinism coupled with incompatibilism yields hard determinism—no free will. And indeterminism that amounts to randomness does not give us free will either.

WRITING TO UNDERSTAND: CRITIQUING PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS Section 5.2

1. Suppose hard determinism is true. Would punishment for offenses ever be justified? Would praise for making good choices be appropriate? If the answer is no, would that constitute an argument against hard determinism?
2. If hard determinism were widely recognized as true, how would that consensus likely affect our judicial system?
3. Do you agree with the criticism of James's indeterminism? Are chance actions really free actions? Explain.
4. Must at least some indeterminism exist in the universe to make free will possible? Why or why not?
5. Suppose James's indeterminist view of free will is correct. What would be the implications for our social practice of rewarding and punishing behavior?

5.3 COMPATIBILISM

You say: I am not free. But I have raised and lowered my arm. Everyone understands that this illogical answer is an irrefutable proof of freedom.
—Leo Tolstoy

The great appeal of traditional compatibilism is that it provides a plausible way to reconcile free will and determinism. It says that determinism is true and so is the commonsense belief that we have free will. Science is squared with our presumption of freedom, and incompatibilism is unfounded.

This reconciliation project has been—and still is—attractive to many serious thinkers, including the ancient Greek Stoics, some English-speaking philosophers of previous centuries, and numerous contemporary proponents. Among the greatest of these are Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), John Locke (1632–1704), David Hume

(1711–1776), and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). Locke sums up traditional compatibilism like this:

John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

But though the preference of the Mind be always determined . . . yet the Person who has the power, in which alone consists the liberty to act, or not to act, according to such preference, is nevertheless free; such determination abridges not that Power.[3]

Compatibilists do not deny that all our wants or desires are caused by preceding events. In fact, they hold that determinism is necessary for free will; an undetermined choice, they say, would be random and uncontrolled by the agent. They insist that even though our desires are determined, we can still act freely as long as (1) we have the power to do what we want, and (2) nothing is preventing us from doing it (for example, no one is restraining or coercing us).

6 Is the compatibilist's definition of "could do otherwise" plausible? Or is it, as James called it, a "wretched subterfuge"?

Both compatibilists and most of their critics agree that free actions (and moral responsibility) require alternative possibilities, or a "could do otherwise" sort of freedom. If we are free—if our actions are truly up to us—we must be able to act in one of several different ways, to have more than one option to choose from. We must have the wherewithal to do otherwise than what we actually do. But if we have only one choice open to us, if all other possibilities are closed, then our actions are not up to us. Incompatibilists say that this is precisely what would happen if determinism were true. But compatibilists assert that we can still do otherwise even if determinism reigns in the world.

But how? Compatibilists can make this claim by assigning a conditional, or hypothetical, meaning to the notion of "could do otherwise." To them, "could do otherwise" means that you would have been able to do something different *if you had wanted to.* You are free in the sense that if you had desired to do something different than what you actually did, nothing would have prevented you from doing it. If you had wanted a piece of cake instead of the slice of pie that you actually got, and nothing would have prevented you from getting cake, then your action was free. Whatever you finally choose is, of course, determined by previous events. But you would have been able to choose differently if history had been different.

7 Does it matter to you whether you have free will? Would your behavior change if you believed (or didn't believe) that all your actions were determined by forces beyond your control?

Here is Walter Stace (1886–1967), a twentieth-century compatibilist, arguing the compatibilist's case by trying to ascertain what we ordinarily mean by "free acts":

W. T. Stace, *Religion and the Modern Mind*

The only reasonable view is that all human actions, both those which are freely done and those which are not, are either wholly determined by causes, or at least as much determined as other events in nature. It may be true, as the physicists tell us, that

W. T. Stace, *Religion and the Modern Mind*

nature is not as deterministic as was once thought. But whatever degree of determinism prevails in the world, human actions appear to be as much determined as anything else. And if this is so, it cannot be the case that what distinguishes actions freely chosen from those which are not free is that the latter are determined by causes while the former are not. Therefore, being uncaused or being undetermined by causes, must be an incorrect definition of free will.

What, then, is the difference between acts which are freely done and those which are not? What is the characteristic which is present [in all free actions] and absent from [all unfree actions]? Is it not obvious that, although both sets of actions have causes, the causes of [free actions] are *of a different kind* from the causes of [unfree acts]? The free acts are all caused by desires, or motives, or by some sort of internal psychological states of the agent's mind. The unfree acts, on the other hand, are all caused by

PHILOSOPHY NOW

Does Belief in Free Will Matter?

Your belief or nonbelief in free will doesn't affect your behavior; your acceptance or rejection of the doctrine doesn't matter to how you live your life. Is this true? Is it true that your belief in free will is inconsequential? Some philosophers, as well as many nonphilosophers, think so. But some scientific research suggests otherwise.

In studies conducted by Kathleen D. Vohs and Jonathan W. Schooler, college students who were encouraged to doubt free will were more likely to cheat than students who were not given that encouragement. This is how the researchers sum up the results:

> In Experiment 1, participants read either text that encouraged a belief in determinism (i.e., that portrayed behavior as the consequence of environmental and genetic factors) or neutral text. Exposure to the deterministic message increased cheating on a task in which participants could passively allow a flawed computer program to reveal answers to mathematical problems that they had been instructed to solve themselves. Moreover, increased cheating behavior was mediated by decreased belief in free will. In Experiment 2, participants who read deterministic statements cheated by overpaying them-

Figure 5.6 Are those who don't believe in free will more likely to cheat? If so, why?

physical forces or physical conditions, outside the agent. Police arrest means physical force exerted from the outside; the absence of food in the desert is a physical condition of the outside world. We may therefore frame the following rough definitions. *Acts freely done are those whose immediate causes are psychological states in the agent. Acts not freely done are those whose immediate causes are states of affairs external to the agent.*

It is plain that if we define free will in this way, then free will certainly exists, and the philosopher's denial of its existence is seen to be what it is—nonsense. For it is obvious that all those actions of men which we should ordinarily attribute to the exercise of their free will, or of which we should say that they freely chose to do them, are in fact actions which have been caused by their own desires, wishes, thoughts, emotions, impulses, or other psychological states.[4]

8 Are free acts, as Stace says, "those whose immediate causes are psychological states in the agent"? Would such acts still be free if the "psychological states" were secretly controlled by someone else through hypnosis?

selves for performance on a cognitive task; participants who read statements endorsing free will did not.

Kathleen D. Vohs and Jonathan W. Schooler, "The Value of Believing in Free Will," Psychological Science *19, no. 1 (2008).*

Studies conducted by Roy F. Baumeister and his colleagues tested the hypothesis that a lack of belief in free will is linked to greater selfishness and increased aggression. The results:

> In Experiment 1, induced belief in free will reduced willingness to help others. Experiment 2 showed that chronic disbelief in free will was associated with reduced helping behavior. In Experiment 3, participants' induced disbelief in free will caused participants to act more aggressively than others.

Roy F. Baumeister, Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin *35, no. 2 (2009).*

Some researchers have hinted that if belief in determinism leads to antisocial behavior, perhaps any research findings supporting determinism should be hidden from the public. Do you think that such a policy would be morally permissible? Would you want to be told the truth about free will and determinism, come what may?

Man is a being with free will; therefore, each man is potentially good or evil, and it's up to him and only him (through his reasoning mind) to decide which he wants to be.
—Ayn Rand

For Stace and other compatibilists, all our actions are caused, but free ones are caused by internal psychological factors, and unfree ones are caused by external factors. When your internal states cause your actions and external forces do not impede or constrain you, you are free to do otherwise.

Incompatibilists, however, insist that this compatibilist freedom is not real freedom at all. They argue that the compatibilist conception of freedom must be mistaken because an agent can do what she wants without external constraints and still not act freely. Real freedom, they contend, is not just the power to act *if we will to act*, but power over the will itself. This is how William L. Rowe makes this argument, directing it specifically against Locke's compatibilism:

William L. Rowe, "Two Concepts of Freedom"

Locke distinguished between a free action and a voluntary action. For your action to be voluntary all that is required is that you will to do that action and perform it, presumably as a result of your willing to do it. Suppose you are sitting in your chair and someone invites you to go for a walk. You reject the idea, choosing instead to remain just where you. Your so remaining, Locke would say, is a voluntary act. But was it a free act? This is a further question for Locke, and it depends on whether you could have done otherwise had you so willed. If I had injected you with a powerful drug, so that at the time—perhaps without your being aware of it—your legs were paralyzed, then your act of remaining in the chair was voluntary but not free, for you could not have got up and walked had you willed to do so. A free act, says Locke, is not just a voluntary act. An act is free if it is voluntary *and* it is true that had you willed to do otherwise you would have been able to do otherwise. For Locke, then, we can say that you are free with respect to a certain action provided it is in your power to do it if you will to do it *and* in your power to refrain from doing it if you should will to refrain. Locke tells us that a man who is chained in prison does not stay in prison freely—even if that is what he wants to do—because it is not in his power to leave if he should will to leave. But if the prison doors are thrown open, and his chains are removed, he is free to leave and free to stay—for he can do either, depending on his will. . . .

Lockean freedom . . . exists solely at the level of *action*: you are free with respect to some action provided that you have the power to do the act if you will to do it, and have the power not to do it if you will not to do it. But what about the *will*? What if you don't have the power to will the action, or don't have the power not to will it? To see the difficulty here, let's return to our example where you are sitting down, someone asks you to get up and walk over to the window to see what is happening outside, but you are quite satisfied where you are and choose to remain sitting. We earlier supposed that I had injected you with a powerful drug so that you can't move your legs. Here Locke would say that you don't sit freely, since it was not in your power to do otherwise if you had willed otherwise—say, to get up and walk to the window. But let's now suppose that instead of paralyzing your legs I had hooked up a machine to your brain so that I can and do cause you to will to sit, thus depriving you of the *capacity* to will to do otherwise. It's still true that you have the power to get up and walk *if* you should will to do so—I haven't taken away your physical capacity to walk,

as I did when I paralyzed your legs. Here the problem is that you can't will to do anything other than sit. In this case, it seems clear that you sit of necessity, not freely. You can't do otherwise than sit, not because you lack the power to get up and walk if you should manage to choose to do that, but because you lack the power to *choose* to get up and walk. On Locke's account of freedom, however, it remains true that you sit freely and not of necessity. And this being so, we must conclude that Locke's account of freedom is simply inadequate. It is not sufficient that you have the power to do otherwise *if* you so will; it must also be true that you have the power to will to do otherwise. Freedom that is worth the name, therefore, must include power *to will*, not simply power *to do if we will*.[5]

9 What is Rowe's argument against traditional compatibilism? Is it sound? Why or why not?

In response to criticism, traditional compatibilists sometimes say that however one feels about the compatibilist conception of freedom, it is at least clear and coherent. The alternative is libertarianism, which they claim is obscure and unintelligible.

WRITING TO UNDERSTAND: CRITIQUING PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS Section 5.3

1. Suppose traditional compatibilism is true. Would punishment, reward, blame, or praise ever be justified?
2. Assuming a dog has desires and often behaves accordingly, would he have free will, according to compatibilism? Why or why not?
3. Does Stace's distinction between free acts and unfree acts make sense? Do you think that an agent's actions can be unimpeded and caused by her psychological states yet still not be free?
4. Does Stace's view of free actions coincide with what most people ordinarily think about such matters? Explain.
5. Which do you think is a more plausible theory of free will—hard determinism or compatibilism? Why?

He sat a long time and he thought about his life and how little of it he could ever have foreseen and he wondered for all his will and all his intent how much of it was his doing.
—Cormac McCarthy

5.4 LIBERTARIANISM

To be taken seriously by the free will skeptic, libertarians must argue their case on three fronts. Against the compatibilist, they must show that determinism and free will are incompatible (that incompatibilism is true). Against the determinist, they must show that there is good reason to believe that we sometimes act freely. And against all free will skeptics, they must demonstrate that the libertarian concept of free will is coherent and plausible.

10 Is our experience good evidence that we have libertarian free will?

11 Do you think the hypothetical interpretation of "could do otherwise" captures our commonsense experience better than the libertarian interpretation? Why or why not?

PHILOSOPHY NOW

Science and Free Will

Is it possible that your actions are predetermined unconsciously *before* you are consciously aware of intending to perform those actions? To the consternation of many libertarians, some scientific research seems to suggest just that—and thus to raise doubts about the existence of free will.

The experiments that caused all the fuss (and inspired many related scientific studies) was conducted by the University of California researcher Benjamin Libet. He recorded the brain activity of subjects as they randomly flexed their index fingers, and he monitored the accompanying muscle movements. He found that the subjects became aware of their intention to move their fingers about 200 milliseconds before the actual movement occurred—an unsurprising result. The astonishing finding was that the subjects became aware of their intention 350 to 400 milliseconds *after* the brain activity that initiates muscle movement had already happened. This seems to suggest that the decision to move was an unconscious event, that consciousness came along after the unconscious decision was already made. If so, where does free will enter the picture?

Libet thought his research showed that there could be at least a limited kind of free will in human actions. The conscious mind may not be involved in initiating actions, but it might be able to veto actions before they happen.

Libet's studies and similar ones by other investigators have been criticized on several counts. For one, the results of the experiments may apply only to simple movements (such as finger flexing). As one critic says, "Willing a stereotyped, well-rehearsed finger movement is too simple to have much bearing on such conscious processes as the decisions made through planning a course of action that spans past and future, or analysis of complex events." Also, some investigators seem to assume that decisions are instantaneous, but this may not be the case. "Why do we think that a decision is instantaneous?" this critic observes. "What we consciously think could well be spread out over time. The process can be on-going but our realization captures the process only as a snap shot in time that suffices to label the decision but not the process." (W. R. Klemm, "Free Will Debates: Simple Experiments Are Not So Simple," *Advances in Cognitive Psychology* 6 (2010): 47–65.) Finally, some detractors accuse Libet and others of failing to distinguish between conscious awareness (the intention to do something) and "meta-conscious awareness" (the awareness that you are intending to do something). The charge is that Libet's subjects are reporting that they are aware that they are consciously intending something (meta-conscious awareness), and this kind of awareness naturally comes after the conscious intention itself is formed (after conscious awareness). So Libet's findings may not be the threat to free will that some researchers assume.

Suppose all our decisions are made for us on an unconscious level so that we do not have conscious control of our actions. How would this fact change your thinking about your actions and about moral responsibility?

Often libertarians try to establish incompatibilism by putting forth what is known as the Consequence Argument. Peter van Inwagen crafted the most influential form of it, which he summarizes like this:

Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will*

If determinism is true, then our acts are the consequences of the laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it is not up to us what went on before we were born, and neither is it up to us what the laws of nature are. Therefore the consequences of these things (including our present acts) are not up to us.[6]

Van Inwagen contends that if determinism is true, then every event—including our every action—is the result of (1) events in the distant past and (2) the laws of nature that rule those events. But we have no power over past events and the laws of nature; we can change neither the events nor the laws. These things are not up to us, and if they are not up to us, their consequences (including our current actions) are not up to us either. We are left with no alternative possibilities. So if determinism is true, we cannot do otherwise: there are no free actions. Therefore, compatibilism is false; incompatibilism is true.

12 What are the premises of van Inwagen's argument? Are they plausible?

Man was predestined to have free will.
—Hal Lee Luyah

Compatibilists often reject the Consequence Argument on the grounds that it assumes a faulty interpretation of "could do otherwise." They say that the Consequence Argument works only if "could do otherwise" is given an incompatibilist meaning, which is that you have the power to will to do otherwise (that your will is up to you). But if you give "could do otherwise" a hypothetical meaning (which compatibilists prefer), the Consequence Argument doesn't go through. Recall that the hypothetical meaning is that you would have been able to do something *if* you had desired to (if you desired to and nothing prevented you from doing it). This "could do otherwise" issue, then, is at the heart of the debate between compatibilists and incompatibilists.

But showing incompatibilism to be true is not the only hurdle facing libertarians, for they must also provide good reasons to think that libertarian free will actually exists. On this score they often contend that the best evidence for the existence of free will comes from our own experience. When making a choice, we often sense that we have genuine options, that we have the power to choose (or not choose) among alternative courses of action, and that what we finally choose and do is genuinely and ultimately up to us. Proponents of free will say that this experience is as persistent and reliable as any we could have, and it provides strong evidence for libertarian freedom. Judging from our perceptions, for example, we think we have good evidence for the existence of physical objects. Likewise, our experience of choosing and acting seems to give us evidence for free will that is at least as strong as that for physical objects.

CHAPTER 5 PHILOSOPHERS

Baron d'Holbach (1723–1789)
William James (1842–1910)
Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)
John Locke (1632–1704)
David Hume (1711–1776)
John Stuart Mill (1806–1873)
Walter Stace (1886–1967)
William L. Rowe (b. 1931)
Peter van Inwagen (b. 1942)
Roderick Chisholm (1916–1999)
Randolph Clarke (b. 1953)
Richard Taylor (1919–2003)
Timothy O'Connor (b. 1965)
Robert Kane (b. 1938)
Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980)

PHILOSOPHY LAB

Imagine that your friend says he knows you so well that he can predict everything you will do in any given time period. So you test him. For an hour you try to act normally, and he observes you. After the hour is up, he hands you his notes that he wrote an hour ago, *before* the experiment began. You are shocked to see that he has accurately predicted your every action.

Then you begin to worry. Does the fact that everything you did was predictable mean that your whole life is determined by forces beyond your control? In other words, is your life predictable because it is *determined*?

Hard determinists and compatibilists typically reply that this experiential sense of freedom is illusory. Our experience is not good evidence for free will, and we believe in free will only because we are ignorant of all the factors (genes and environment, for example) that determine us. Libertarians reply that we can indeed be mistaken about whether our actions are free, for our experience could mislead us. But we are entitled to trust our experience unless evidence gives us good reasons to doubt it. And so far, they say, there are no good reasons to do so.

Can libertarians provide an intelligible and credible explanation of how free will is possible? If not, libertarianism will be regarded as a problematic theory—even if incompatibilism and the existence of free will are assumed. The main difficulty is explaining how actions can be free if indeterminism is true—that is, if actions are not caused by prior events. How can an action be uncaused? And if it is uncaused by previous events, wouldn't it be simply random? A random action is not a free action.

Several philosophers have responded to these worries, most notably Thomas Reid in the eighteenth century and in recent years Roderick Chisholm, Randolph Clarke, Richard Taylor, Timothy O'Connor, and Robert Kane. One proposed solution favored by most of these is **agent causation**, the view that a free action is caused by an agent (person) and is not wholly determined by previous events. Here is Taylor making a case for one version of this theory:

Agent causation is the view that a free action is caused by an agent (person) and is not wholly determined by previous events.

13 Does Taylor's concept of agent causation accurately reflect what people take themselves to be doing when they perform actions? Why or why not?

Richard Taylor, *Metaphysics*

The only conception of action that accords with our data is one according to which people—and perhaps some other things too—are sometimes, but of course not always,

self-determining beings; that is, beings that are sometimes the causes of their own behavior. In the case of an action that is free, it must not only be such that it is caused by the agent who performs it, but also such that no antecedent conditions were sufficient for his performing just that action. In the case of an action that is both free and rational, it must be such that the agent who performed it did so for some reason, but this reason cannot have been the cause of it.

Now this conception fits what people take themselves to be; namely, beings who act, or who are agents, rather than beings that are merely upon, and whose behavior is simply the causal consequence of conditions that they have not wrought. When I believe that I have done something, I do believe that it was I who caused it to be done, I who made something happen, and not merely something within me, such as one of my own subjective states, which is not identical with myself. If I believe that something not identical with myself was the cause of my behavior—some event wholly external to myself, for instance, or even one internal to myself, such as a nerve impulse, volition, or whatnot—then I cannot regard that behavior as being an act of mine, unless I further believe that I was the cause of that external or internal event. My pulse, for example, is caused and regulated by certain conditions existing within me, and not by myself. I do not, accordingly, regard this activity of my body as my action, and would be no more tempted to do so if I became suddenly conscious within myself of those conditions or impulses that produce it. This is behavior with which I have nothing to do, behavior that is not only not free activity, but not even the activity of an agent to begin with; it is nothing but a mechanical reflex. Had I never learned that my very life depends on this pulse beat, I would regard it with complete indifference, as something foreign to me, like the oscillations of a clock pendulum that I idly contemplate.

Now this conception of activity, and of an agent who is the cause of it, involves two rather strange metaphysical notions that are never applied elsewhere in nature. The first is that of a *self* or *person*—for example, a man—who is not merely a collection of things or events, but a self-moving being. For on this view it is a person, and not merely some part of him or something within him, that is the cause of his own activity. Now, we certainly do not know that a human being is anything more than an assemblage of physical things and processes that act in accordance with those laws that describe the behavior of all other physical things and processes. Even though he is a living being, of enormous complexity, there is nothing, apart from the requirements of this theory, to suggest that his behavior is so radically different in its origin from that of other physical objects, or that an understanding of it must be sought in some metaphysical realm wholly different from that appropriate to the understanding of nonliving things.

Second, this conception of activity involves an extraordinary conception of causation according to which an agent, which is a substance and not an event, can nevertheless be the cause of an event. Indeed, if he is a free agent then he can, on this conception, cause an event to occur—namely, some act of his own—without anything else causing him to do so. This means that an agent is sometimes a cause, without being an antecedent sufficient condition; for if I affirm that I am the cause of some act of mine, then I am plainly not saying that my very existence is sufficient for its occurrence, which would be absurd. If I say that my hand causes my pencil to move, then I am saying that the motion of my hand is, under the other conditions then prevailing, sufficient for the motion of the pencil. But if I then say that I cause my hand to move, I am not saying anything remotely like this, and surely not that the motion of my self

14 How might a determinist or indeterminist respond to Taylor's notion of agent causation?

Free will is an illusion. People always choose the perceived path of greatest pleasure.
—Scott Adams

Richard Taylor, *Metaphysics*

> is sufficient for the motion of my arm and hand, since these are the only things about me that are moving.
>
> This conception of the causation of events by things that are not events is, in fact, so different from the usual philosophical conception of a cause that it should not even bear the same name, for "being a cause" ordinarily just means "being an antecedent sufficient condition or set of conditions." Instead, then, of speaking of agents as *causing* their own acts, it would perhaps be better to use another word entirely, and say, for instance, that they *originate* them, *initiate* them, or simply that they *perform* them.
>
> Now this is, on the face of it, a dubious conception of what a person is. Yet it is consistent with our data, reflecting the presuppositions of deliberation, and appears to be the only conception that is consistent with them, as determinism and simple indeterminism are not. The theory of agency avoids the absurdities of simple indeterminism by conceding that human behavior is caused, while at the same time avoiding the difficulties of determinism by denying that every chain of causes and effects is infinite. Some such causal chains, on this view, have beginnings, and they begin with agents themselves. Moreover, if we are to suppose that it is sometimes up to me what I do, and understand this in a sense that is not consistent with determinism, we must suppose that I am an agent or a being who initiates his own actions, sometimes under conditions that do not determine what action I shall perform. Deliberation becomes, on this view, something that is not only possible but quite rational, for it does make sense to deliberate about activity that is truly my own and that depends in its outcome upon me as its author, and not merely upon something more or less esoteric that is supposed to be intimately associated with me, such as my thoughts, volitions, choices or whatnot.[7]

Taylor acknowledges that this take on free will may at first glance seem implausible, but he thinks the theory is the only one that fits with our common experience of actions and choices.

O'Connor also subscribes to agent causation, and like everyone who takes this view he holds that free actions are caused by the agent. But in explaining this, he suggests that all events in the universe are produced in virtue of the properties that objects possess. Ordinary events are produced this way; likewise, an agent may produce an event in virtue of the unique properties that she possesses. When she makes a free choice, she does so via what O'Connor calls "volition-enabling properties." Thus her choice is not determined by previous events; it is produced by her. Specifically, she makes her choice based on the reasons she has, and the reasons influence the production of the decision without causally determining it. The choice is not random because it is produced by her; she is the author and cause of it.

As you might expect, agent causation perspectives are disputed at many points, with opponents contending that the theories are incoherent or otherwise inadequate and proponents denying the charge. But as such debates unfold, libertarians insist that, despite claims to the contrary, plausible theories of libertarian free will are on the table.

WRITING TO UNDERSTAND: CRITIQUING PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS Section 5.4

1. What is the libertarian argument for the existence of free will? Is the argument convincing? Is the argument's premise true?
2. Is the hypothetical interpretation of "could do otherwise" plausible? Is it what we usually mean when we say we could have done otherwise? Explain.
3. Is our experience of choosing and acting good evidence for free will? Is it at least as strong as the evidence for physical objects? Explain.
4. What is Taylor's argument for agent causation? Is it cogent? Why or why not?
5. What are the three claims that libertarians must advance to make their theory believable? Do you accept each of these? Explain why you do or do not accept them.

5.5 SARTRE'S PROFOUND FREEDOM

The foregoing doctrines—hard determinism, compatibilism, and libertarianism—are the major philosophical stances on free will and determinism, each with a long history and articulate proponents. But they are not the only views on the subject. Other thinkers, both contemporary and influential, have advanced unique perspectives on human freedom or have taken issue with the standard viewpoints. Among the most interesting and influential of these voices is the existentialist philosopher and novelist Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980).

Sartre is one of the modern founders of the philosophical perspective known as *existentialism*, a central tenet of which is that humans are profoundly free to create their own lives and thus are entirely responsible for defining the meaning and moral relevance of their existence. From reflections on his own lived experience, Sartre arrives at what he takes to be some basic truths about human beings and their existential predicament. Unlike almost every philosopher before him, he not only believes that we are free, but also insists that we are *radically* free. We may be influenced by the factors of nature and nurture (heredity and environment), but ultimately we are not determined by them. We are totally free—free to define ourselves by our own lights and capable of resisting the physical, psychological, and social forces that will thoroughly shape us if we let them. We are determined only if we allow ourselves to be determined.

Figure 5.7 Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980).

Mankind has a free will; but it is free to milk cows and to build houses, nothing more.
—Martin Luther

Man is condemned to be free.
—Jean-Paul Sartre

15 Sartre reasons from his lived experience to his theory of free will. Does his experience provide adequate support for his assertions?

One of Sartre's core ideas is that "existence precedes essence." Most people assume, he says, that "essence precedes existence"—that before we come into existence, our fundamental characteristics (our essence) as humans are already set. They think that our psychological makeup, choices, desires, and ideas are in a sense locked in before we can say our first words. Our destiny is mapped out beforehand through the workings of a creator God or a universal human nature or some unalterable social structure. But, according to Sartre, this kind of "essence precedes existence" thinking is tragically mistaken. It prevents us from seeing a future of open possibilities, saps our creativity, limits our freedom, and weakens our sense of our moral responsibility. The truth, says Sartre, is the opposite of the received view: "existence precedes essence"—we first come into being and then we define ourselves. He declares, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself."

And what is this radical freedom that we all possess? It is both a blessing and a curse. As Sartre says, "We are condemned to be free." The blessing is that as free persons, we have the power to set our own goals, live our own lives, and create ourselves as we go. The curse is that as free beings, we can look to no one but ourselves to decide how we should live. We carry this burden alone. We must bear the awesome moral responsibility of deciding how we should live, how we should treat others, and what values we should prescribe for the rest of the world through our actions. We can celebrate our capacity to create our essence and live by our own rules, but because we are utterly alone in bearing this monumental burden, we are also condemned to experience great anguish, despair, and a sense of abandonment.

This is how Sartre explained this existentialist freedom in a famous lecture titled "Existentialism Is a Humanism":

Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism"

What [existentialists] have in common is that they think that existence precedes essence, or, if you prefer, that subjectivity must be the starting point.

Just what does that mean? Let us consider some object that is manufactured, for example, a book or a paper-cutter: here is an object which has been made by an artisan whose inspiration came from a concept. He referred to the concept of what a paper-cutter is and likewise to a known method of production, which is part of the concept, something which is, by and large, a routine. Thus, the paper-cutter is at once an object produced in a certain way and, on the other hand, one having a specific use; and one cannot postulate a man who produces a paper-cutter but does not know what it is used for. Therefore, let us say that, for the paper-cutter, essence—that is, the ensemble of both the production routines and the properties which enable it to be both produced and defined—precedes existence. Thus, the presence of the paper-cutter or book in front of me is determined. Therefore, we have here a technical view of the world whereby it can be said that production precedes existence.

When we conceive God as the Creator, He is generally thought of as a superior sort of artisan. Whatever doctrine we may be considering, whether one like that of

Descartes or that of Leibnitz, we always grant that will more or less follows understanding or, at the very least, accompanies it, and that when God creates He knows exactly what He is creating. Thus, the concept of man in the mind of God is comparable to the concept of paper-cutter in the mind of the manufacturer, and, following certain techniques and a conception, God produces man, just as the artisan, following a definition and a technique, makes a paper-cutter. Thus, the individual man is the realization of a certain concept in the divine intelligence.

In the eighteenth century, the atheism of the *philosophes* discarded the idea of God, but not so much for the notion that essence precedes existence. To a certain extent, this idea is found everywhere; we find it in Diderot, in Voltaire, and even in Kant. Man has a human nature; this human nature, which is the concept of the human, is found in all men, which means that each man is a particular example of a universal concept, man. In Kant, the result of this universality is that the wild-man, the natural man, as well as the bourgeois, are circumscribed by the same definition and have the same basic qualities. Thus, here too the essence of man precedes the historical existence that we find in nature.

Atheistic existentialism, which I represent, is more coherent. It states that if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept, and that this being is man, or, as Heidegger says, human reality. What is meant here by saying that existence precedes essence? It means that, first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself. If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be. Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after this thrust toward existence.

Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism. It is also what is called subjectivity, the name we are labeled with when charges are brought against us. But what do we mean by this, if not that man has a greater dignity than a stone or table? For we mean that man first exists, that is, that man first of all is the being in the future. Man is at the start a plan which is aware of itself, rather than a patch of moss, a piece of garbage, or a cauliflower; nothing exists prior to this plan; there is nothing in heaven; man will be what he will have planned to be. Not what he will want to be. Because by the word "will" we generally mean a conscious decision, which is subsequent to what we have already made of ourselves. I may want to belong to a political party, write a book, get married; but all that is only a manifestation of an earlier, more spontaneous choice that is called "will." But if existence really does precede essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, 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. And when we say that a man is responsible for himself, we do not only mean that he is responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men. . . .

When we say that man chooses his own self, we mean that every one of us does likewise; but we also mean by that that in making this choice he also chooses all men. In fact, in creating the man that we want to be, there is not a single one of our acts which does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be. To choose to be this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose, because we can never choose evil. We always choose the good, and nothing can be good for us without being good for all.

16 Is Sartre exaggerating the extent to which people can define themselves when he says "existence precedes essence"?

Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism"

If, on the other hand, existence precedes essence, and if we grant that we exist and fashion our image at one and the same time, the image is valid for everybody and for our whole age. Thus, our responsibility is much greater than we might have supposed, because it involves all mankind. . . . Therefore, I am responsible for myself and for everyone else. I am creating a certain image of man of my own choosing. In choosing myself, I choose man.

This helps us understand what the actual content is of such rather grandiloquent words as anguish, forlornness, despair. As you will see, it's all quite simple.

First, what is meant by anguish? The existentialists say at once that man is anguish. What that means is this: the man who involves himself and who realizes that he is not only the person he chooses to be, but also a law-maker who is, at the same time, choosing all mankind as well as himself, cannot help escape the feeling of his total and deep responsibility. Of course, there are many people who are not anxious; but we claim that they are hiding their anxiety, that they are fleeing from it. Certainly, many people believe that when they do something, they themselves are the only ones involved, and when someone says to them, "What if everyone acted that way?" they shrug their shoulders and answer, "Everyone doesn't act that way." But really, one should always ask himself, "What would happen if everybody looked at things that way?" There is no escaping this disturbing thought except by a kind of double-dealing. . . .

There is no question here of the kind of anguish which would lead to quietism, to inaction. It is a matter of a simple sort of anguish that anybody who has had responsibilities is familiar with. For example, when a military officer takes the responsibility for an attack and sends a certain number of men to death, he chooses to do so, and in the main he alone makes the choice. Doubtless, orders come from above, but they are too broad; he interprets them, and on this interpretation depend the lives of ten or fourteen or twenty men. In making a decision he cannot help having a certain anguish. All leaders know this anguish. That doesn't keep them from acting; on the contrary, it is the very condition of their action. For it implies that they envisage a number of possibilities, and when they choose one, they realize that it has value only because it is chosen. We shall see that this kind of anguish, which is the kind that existentialism describes, is explained, in addition, by a direct responsibility to the other men whom it involves. It is not a curtain separating us from action, but is part of action itself.

When we speak of forlornness, a term Heidegger was fond of, we mean only that God does not exist and that we have to face all the consequences of this. The existentialist is strongly opposed to a certain kind of secular ethics which would like to abolish God with the least possible expense. . . .

The existentialist, on the contrary, thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him; there can be no longer an *a priori* Good, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. Nowhere is it written that the Good exists, that we must be honest, that we must not lie; because the fact is we are on a plane where there are only men. Dostoievsky said, "If God didn't exist, everything would be possible." That is the very starting point of existentialism. Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist, and as a result man is forlorn, because neither within him nor without does he find anything to cling to. He can't start making excuses for himself.

If existence really does precede essence, there is no explaining things away by reference to a fixed and given human nature. In other words, there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom. On the other hand, if God does not exist, we find no values or

commands to turn to which legitimize our conduct. So, in the bright realm of values, we have no excuse behind us, no justification before us. We are alone, with no excuses.

That is the idea I shall try to convey when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet, in other respects is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. . . .

As for despair, the term has a very simple meaning. It means that we shall confine ourselves to reckoning only with what depends upon our will, or on the ensemble of probabilities which make our action possible. When we want something, we always have to reckon with probabilities. I may be counting on the arrival of a friend. The friend is coming by rail or street-car; this supposes that the train will arrive on schedule, or that the street-car will not jump the track. I am left in the realm of possibility; but possibilities are to be reckoned with only to the point where my action comports with the ensemble of these possibilities, and no further. The moment the possibilities I am considering are not rigorously involved by my action, I ought to disengage myself from them, because no God, no scheme, can adapt the world and its possibilities to my will. When Descartes said, "Conquer yourself rather than the world," he meant essentially the same thing. . . .

Actually, things will be as man will have decided they are to be. Does that mean that I should abandon myself to quietism? No. First, I should involve myself; then, act on the old saw, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." Nor does it mean that I shouldn't belong to a party, but rather that I shall have no illusions and shall do what I can. For example, suppose I ask myself, "Will socialization, as such, ever come about?" I know nothing about it. All I know is that I'm going to do everything in my power to bring it about. Beyond that, I can't count on anything. Quietism is the attitude of people who say, "Let others do what I can't do." The doctrine I am presenting is the very opposite of quietism, since it declares, "There is no reality except in action." Moreover, it goes further, since it adds, "Man is nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfills himself; he is, therefore, nothing else than the ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life."[8]

17 Are people wholly responsible for the kind of persons they become?

18 Is it true that if God does not exist, there are no objective moral standards? What would utilitarians and others who prefer secular theories of morality have to say about this claim?

The hard determinists would, of course, reject Sartre's brand of free will. For them, everything we know about science suggests that such unfettered freedom is impossible. For much the same reason, compatibilists would find Sartre's view difficult to accept, for they too believe in determinism. Even the libertarians would insist that our experience shows that at least some of our actions are determined, and they would likely agree that not all of science's evidence for determinism can be as easily dismissed as Sartre assumes.

You may fetter my leg, but Zeus himself cannot get the better of my free will.
—Epictetus

FICTION

A Little Omniscience Goes a Long Way

Thomas D. Davis

Thomas D. Davis is a philosopher, textbook writer, and author of three novels—*Suffer Little Children*, *Murdered Sleep*, and *Consuming Fire*.

Satan, with a flutter of his mighty wings, descends upon a cloud where God is reclining.

SATAN: How's it going?

GOD: (*He yawns.*) Perfectly, as usual.

SATAN: And your new creatures on earth—how are they?

GOD: Just fine. Eve's asleep under the apple tree, curled up on her right side, dreaming of flowers. Adam is sitting up, squinting at the sun, scratching his nose with his left index finger, trying to decide what he wants to do this morning. What he wants to do is take a walk in the garden. In a moment he will.

SATAN: And you know all that without looking.

GOD: Of course. I arranged it all to happen that way.

SATAN: Isn't it boring to know everything that will ever happen? This morning I saw two solar systems collide and explode in a tremendous cataclysm. The explosion must have lasted, oh, ten minutes. It was lovely and, for me, quite unexpected. I can't imagine life without surprises. It's surprises that keep me going. In a manner of speaking, of course.

GOD: Foreknowledge is the price you pay for creation and control. You can't have everything.

SATAN: Boredom is the secret sadness of God. An interesting thought.

GOD: To you, maybe.

SATAN: Your only sadness, I hope.

GOD: Not the only one. For instance, I've often thought it would be fun to make a rock so big I couldn't lift it. But that would be a contradiction. And having proclaimed all contradictions impossible, I have to make do without them. The laws of logic are for the best, of course. There would be chaos without them. Still, a few round squares now and then would help break the monotony.

SATAN: I could tell you about some of my adventures today. But you know about them already.

GOD: Of course. I know what you did because I decreed that you would do it.

SATAN: That is exactly what I want to talk with you about.

GOD: I know.

SATAN: You don't mind?

GOD: If I minded, I wouldn't have decided to make you initiate this conversation.

SATAN: That's reasonable.

GOD: Of course it's reasonable. Everything I do or say is reasonable. Which is to say that I have a reason for doing or saying it.

SATAN: To get to the point: A few of the angels and I have been discussing this whole matter of your controlling everything we do.

GOD: I know.

SATAN: I wish you wouldn't keep saying that.

GOD: As you wish.

SATAN: Look here. If you have decreed this whole conversation and know how it is going to turn out, why don't you just give me your answer and save us both a lot of talk?

GOD: Don't be absurd. I know what's going to happen because I decreed that it would happen. If it weren't going to happen, I wouldn't know how it was going to turn out. If I told you now how it will turn out, then it wouldn't happen and so it wouldn't turn out that way.

SATAN: Come again?

GOD: Just trust me.

SATAN: Then we have to go through this whole conversation to get the answer, though you know all the while what the answer will be?

GOD: It's not quite that cut and dried.

SATAN: You mean you don't know exactly what your answer will be?

Thomas D. Davis, "A Little Omniscience Goes a Long Way," in *Philosophy: An Introduction Through Original Fiction, Discussion, and a Multi-Media CD-ROM* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 11–17.

GOD: Not with absolute certainty.

SATAN: Oh, I see. You're saying that your actions are not inevitable.

GOD: No. Probably what I do is inevitable. The uncertainty is rather a matter of my knowing what inevitable thing I am going to do. You see, when I create a world, I know what will inevitably happen in that world because I created it so that such things would be inevitable. But of course, I did not create myself, being eternal, and I don't have quite the same vantage point on myself.

SATAN: You mean to say that you don't know what you are going to do before you do it?

GOD: Oh, I generally have a pretty good idea. At first, so to speak, I had no idea at all. But I have lived an infinite length of time, I have come to know myself pretty well, and I have found that I have a relatively unchanging character. It was when I realized how unchanging I am that I began to get bored. Still, I do surprise myself occasionally.

SATAN: Just a minute. You are perfectly good—yes?

GOD: Perfectly.

SATAN: And everything you do is for the best?

GOD: Yes.

SATAN: Then it follows that you must know what you are going to do.

GOD: No. I mean superficially your logic is sound, but you are reading too much into it. I don't do things because they're best. Rather, they're best because I do them. Therefore, knowing that I'll do what's for the best amounts to nothing more than knowing that I'll do what I do. Not a very helpful bit of information, you must admit.

SATAN: I suppose not. But, in any case, as to this conversation, you don't know for certain what answer you're going to give me.

GOD: Not for certain. There's a bit of gray area here. Possibly I am in for a bit of a change.

SATAN: Ah, you don't know how encouraged that makes me feel.

GOD: Of course I know how encouraged that makes you feel. I made it make you feel encouraged.

SATAN: Can we get on with it?

GOD: Go ahead.

SATAN: We do everything we do because you make us do it. That makes us feel like puppets. It's undignified. We're not responsible for anything we do. We do good things all the time, but we don't get any credit because it's really you doing them.

GOD: Surely you don't want me to make you do evil?

SATAN: No.

GOD: That wouldn't make any sense. I can't make you do evil. Whatever I made you do would be good, because I made you do it.

SATAN: What I am talking about is control. Right now you have complete control over everything we do. We would like to have some control over our lives.

GOD: But you do have control. No one is shoving you around or chaining you down. You do whatever you want to do. How could anyone be more in control than that? As a matter of fact, that is exactly as much control as I have over my life.

SATAN: But what we want, you make us want. No one makes you want what you want. We don't want you to control everything we want and think. We don't want everything to be inevitable.

GOD: In other words, you want a privilege that probably not even God enjoys.

SATAN: I didn't think of it that way. I suppose I've made you angry.

GOD: No. I'm directing this conversation. So you don't want your thoughts and emotions ruled by my decrees? Nor any other decrees or laws, I suppose?

SATAN: No.

GOD: Then aren't you saying that you want your lives to be ruled by chance?

SATAN: No. We don't want them to be ruled by anything—except ourselves. We want control over our lives.

GOD: I'm afraid you'll have to give me a better idea of what it is you're after.

SATAN: Look here. You're omniscient. Can't you at least help us see what it is we're after, even if you decide not to grant it?

GOD: Even omniscience can't see clarity in a vague idea. The opposite of inevitability is chance. It seems to me that you have to pick one or the other.

SATAN: Chance, then.

GOD: If I grant you this chance you want, then that means I'll have to be watching all the time to see what happens, constantly guarding against the unexpected. That is quite a bit to ask of me, don't you think?

SATAN: You mean you can't foresee what happens by chance?

GOD: Of course not.

SATAN: But you're omniscient. You can see the future.

GOD: Not the future proper. The future is what is not yet. If I could see it, it would be now, and hence not the future. As things stand, I know what will happen because I have made things so that they must happen that way.

SATAN: Well, suppose you did have to keep on guard. You're omnipotent. It wouldn't cost you much effort.

GOD: It is more a question of elegance than of effort.

SATAN: I'm only making the suggestion you made me make.

GOD: Fair enough. So you say you want chance. Or at least that you prefer it to inevitability. I don't believe you have thought it out, but let's discuss it. You want a world in which nothing is predictable, solar systems spinning wildly all over the place, that sort of thing?

SATAN: No, not at all. Let the planets and the plants and the animals remain under your control. Just give independence—chance, if you will—to the thinking creatures.

GOD: Let's experiment a bit, shall we? Come over here. You see Adam and Eve down there in the garden. I'll toss some chance into them. There. Watch and tell me what you see.

SATAN: Adam's strolling through the garden. He's looking to his right toward a berry bush. Uh-oh. Now his arms are flailing about. Now he's rolling on the ground, drooling. It looks as if he's having a fit.

GOD: A chance event.

SATAN: But Eve looks quite normal. She's just awakened, and she's yawning.

GOD: Anything can happen by chance, even the normal things.

SATAN: Obviously there's a problem with Adam, and I think I see what it is. You have allowed chance to affect his mind and body. But the body is not the real Adam, it is merely an appendage. So when chance operates in his body, it does indeed control Adam. Confine the chance to his mind, and then Adam will be truly independent. Would you do so? And with Eve as well.

GOD: As you say. Let's watch again.

SATAN: Adam's getting up now. He's walking over to a bush and picking some berries. You're not making him do that?

GOD: No.

SATAN: This looks like it then. Adam in control . . . oops! Now his arms are flailing. He's having that fit again. What happened?

GOD: First, by chance, he wanted to eat the berries. Now, by chance, he wants to roll on the ground and drool. The desires are happening by chance instead of my causing them. I can't tell what he's going to want next. Neither can he.

SATAN: And look at Eve. Good grief, she's talking to a snake. Weird.

GOD: Apparently she just got the urge. Are you ready?

SATAN: For what?

GOD: You said you wanted me to give you chance.

SATAN: No! Please don't!

GOD: Why not?

SATAN: That's horrible, having things happen to you like that. There's no dignity there. I want to stay as I am.

GOD: That's wise, I think. You may not have the kind of control you want. But then that kind of control is impossible. Inevitability or chance—those are the only options. And neither constitutes ultimate control over one's life. But at least this way what happens to you will be orderly.

SATAN: I feel better now that we've talked this out.

GOD: Actually, I'm sorry nothing came of our talk—sorry the way I am about square circles. I could use a little excitement.

SATAN: I won't take any more of your time today. Oh, but there is one other thing. Please take that chance out of Adam and Eve. I wouldn't want that on my conscience.

Satan exits with a flutter of his mighty wings.

GOD: As you say . . . I suppose. On the other hand, it would be nice to have a part of the universe where there are surprises. It could prove interesting.