

Not Choosing to be Born

In *Harry*, ch. 10, the students discuss the problem of free will in an attempt to understand the confusing circumstances surrounding Dale's departure. In a tone of determinism, Sandy, Bill and Jane recount some of the many ways in which (apparent to them), their lives are not free. They feel it important to note that not only do they not have any choice in attending school, practicing religion or selecting parents, they also don't have any influence regarding the fact that they were born. Sandy is, however, willing to allow some self-determination despite these apparent obstacles. Sandy attempts to explain the way in which we are free in some ways and not really free in other ways and that some of those restrictions, commitments, and responsibilities stem directly from our ability to make our own choices.

That the human being is free in this way, is an idea introduced by Kant in an attempt to ground morality in man's ability to choose among possibilities and be responsible for his act(s). Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre, likewise, distinguish human freedom from natural law and causation. For the latter three though, the concern is with freedom of choice and, against Kant these philosophers argue that it is the non-existence of Kant's alleged rational justification(s) of action that personal freedom, with an emphasis on choice, exists. Of central importance to the Existentialists is the rejection of "rational guidelines" or any other postulated "a priori" grounds for making one choice over another. According to Heidegger there is, necessarily, an existential structure to Dasein (not truly translatable; partially "being-there"), of recognition of one's own existence while recognizing one's own existence to be in a particular world. In response to characterizations of humanness such as Jane's — "... we don't even choose to be born." (p. 51, line 7), Heidegger says that Dasein necessarily finds himself "thrown" into a particular world. One's "facticity" or (thrownness) is all that is determined about one's situation. It is that set of facts about oneself which are there and not subject to one's choices, and include one's birth and one's past. It is *within* the situation each person is restricted by, that one is free.

Sartre readily admits the paradox of freedom: there is freedom only in a "situation" and there is a situation only through freedom. Human reality everywhere encounters resistances 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.¹ The radical freedom of these seemingly self-contradictory notions is encumbered by the impossibility of actually regarding one's facticity clearly; for bad faith/inauthenticity and the psychologists of the 19th century encourage one to be fatalistic about the so-called passions which are, "... not facts at all, but consciously chosen projects." (Sartre)²

The human reality thus, for those who realize that man is free to choose according to his evaluations of possible states of affairs, for him, is by virtue of the fact that man is condemned to be free and to carry the weight of the whole world on his shoulders. This responsibility wholly assumes the situation with its peculiar coefficient of adversity, due to the proud consciousness of being the author of it — and

he is senseless to complain since nothing alien has decided what we feel, live or are — these simply being the logical consequences of our freedom.³

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Footnotes

1. *The Phil. of J. P. Sartre*, ed./intro. by R. Cumming. New York: Random House, 1965, p. 270.
2. *Ibid*, p. 275.
3. *Ibid*, p. 278.

Bibliography

- Heidegger, M. *Being and Time*. New York: Harper and Row, 1962.
- Kierkegaard, S. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Translated by D. F. Swenson and W. Lowrie. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1941.