4 Sartre's moral psychology

Across its long history moral philosophy has been as concerned with the cultivation of certain moral dispositions, or traits of character, or moral psychologies, as it has been with establishing the validity and universality of moral rules and principles. Moral psychology begins with the inner person: not how we outwardly conform to external moral rules, but how we are in our hearts and souls and, particularly, how we are when we are truly flourishing as human beings. It is therefore concerned with the ethics of virtue, and a casual glance at the respective moral psychologies of Aristotle, Augustine, Spinoza, Hume, Kant, and the existentialists would reveal analyses of such virtues as integrity, justice, prudence, courage, magnanimity, sincerity, and authenticity. These are not innate dispositions, or inherited traits of personality like shyness or cheerfulness. They are acquired by teaching or practice or reflection, and to a certain extent reveal what we have made of ourselves; thus they express our moral way of being, and our fundamentl moral outlook, and not just something we happen to have.

Sartre's concern with the ethics of character, the conditions of self-determination and human agency, and the phenomenology of moral life, places him within this tradition of moral and philosophical psychology. This essay is concerned with elaborating and clarifying a number of interrelated aspects of Sartre's moral and philosophical psychology, particularly as they are developed in *Being and Nothingness*[1]: self-determination and agency, responsibility for self, the unity of a life, moral reasoning, and self-knowledge. Some of Sartre's responses to the shortcomings of his earlier views on these issues will also be studied, particularly as they are developed in *The Family Idiot*.[2] Before turning to Sartre's views, however,

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some of the territory characterizing moral and philosophical psychology will be mapped out.

Embedded in our folk psychology and in our Western conceptual framework for persons, as well as in our legal systems, is a model of rational moral autonomy that reflects some of our deepest beliefs about what human flourishing is, and what is most distinctive and morally important about persons. The moral autonomy it sets forth is the kind that we would ascribe to people who have not passively acquiesced to social expectations, roles, and values, but who have, by reasoning, choice, or moral reflection, arrived at their own moral outlook and view of the good life; who have achieved a level of personal and interpersonal integrity, by assuming a stance of self-criticism and self-questioning toward their desires, beliefs, volitions, actions, and habits; and who know with some acuity what they are doing with their lives, and what their true goals are. Obviously not everyone actually attains this level of moral autonomy and self-knowledge, but we hold it as an ideal to which we should aspire, and we evaluate ourselves and others in light of it.[3] We consider its achievement a virtue, just as we consider the lack of it (as manifested in self-deception or self-ignorance) a moral shortcoming.

However familiar and intuitively appealing this model may be, it still invites some important questions – particularly with the advance of a number of sciences that make the claim that we are not really masters of our own house:

1. To what extent can we really determine and control our way of life, our moral dispositions, and our fundamental moral outlook? How much of this process is rational?
2. On what grounds can we be held responsible for our way of life and our character?
3. Can we blame people who, because of environmental or hereditary factors over which they have had no control, end up with destructive character traits, or psychopathological attitudes?
4. How does a human life "hang together"? Does it add up to anything more than a complex flux of events and experiences?

Sartre's position on these issues changed importantly during his career. In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), he argued that the freedom

we enjoy as moral agents consists in an autonomous and creative agency (and not, as many critics charge, in radical indeterminacy or causelessness). We are free, in a morally important sense, to be as we want to be. This means that we are free to choose who (but not what) we are, and to lay out the ground plan of our way of life, within a range of given determinants and situational constraints. We are also free, within certain bounds, to remake ourselves, and the assumption of alternative ways of life, life plans, and moral outlooks always remains a living option. To this Sartre adds that regardless of whether we actually remake ourselves, or achieve moral autonomy, we are always and already completely responsible for our actions and our way of life.

This view clearly has strong Kantian underpinnings in the way it conceives people as the source of their own moral authority and moral being ("Think for yourself" was one of Kant's favorite sayings), in its defense of freedom as the condition of possibility for moral responsibility, and in the way it elevates people (qua moral agents and persons) above the realm of nature and the empirically determined. The existentialist's emphasis on individual freedom, choice, and authenticity is prefigured in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, where Kant argues that "man *himself* must make or have made himself into whatever, in a moral sense, whether good or evil, he is or is to become. Either condition must be an effect on his free choice. . . ."[4]

In *The Family Idiot* (1971–2), his massive biography of Gustave Flaubert, Sartre continued to identify freedom with self-determination, and continued to defend the importance of moral autonomy; but he allowed comparatively little constructivity – and even less plasticity – in the given determinants. We are socially conditioned "all the way down," and we can make something of ourselves only within the narrow limits of what we have already been made into. Yet Sartre still retained his belief that we are totally responsible for ourselves.

The differences between the moral and philosophical psychology of these two stages of Sartre's career are significant. In the former work, the center of Sartre's concern is largely with the origin of our actions, insofar as these can be traced to a deep-lying source of creative agency by virtue of which we choose ourselves ab initio. The form his explanation takes is largely transcendental, and in the tradi-

tion of Kant and Husserl. In the latter work, he is concerned with our assumption of responsibility for ourselves, by means of the activity of integrating and identifying with the many *antecedent* and *given* psychological, biological, and historical influences that condition us. Moral agency is to be found *within* the limits of our given psychological, cognitive, emotional, and motivational makeup, and not in spite of them, or in some deeper source of agency that is (in a transcendental sense) presupposed by them. Some of the differences between these two concerns will be examined in the following pages.

HARD DETERMINISM

One way to set the stage for an elucidation of Sartre's views on self-determination and human agency is to begin by showing how the hard determinist approach to moral psychology drastically decreases the range of determinants of our actions over which we can exert control. According to this approach, which Sartre accuses of bad faith and "seriousness" (*BN*, p. 40), our personal identity is formed *for* us, by circumstances and forces external and antecedent to our purposes, choice, will, or understanding: it is not, in any significant sense, formed *by* us. As the biochemical and neurosciences are showing, our cognitive, motivational, and psychological makeup stands at the tip of a massive causal iceberg that extends far beyond our awareness and control, and deep into our prehistories. We think ourselves free (that is, faced with genuine possibilities, exercising choices, and possessed of a certain creative agency) only to the extent that we are ignorant of the vast work network of natural causes of our actions (neurophysiological, for example) and the lawful relations governing them. Although the reflexive power to alter certain aspects of our inherited psychological and motivational makeup may be granted as one of the intermediate factors in the formation of this makeup, this power is itself formed by antecedent circumstances not subject to our control, will, or choice.

Hard determinists argue that these are sufficient grounds for considering that the kind of freedom and control that we would like to have, and that is embodied in our folk model of moral autonomy, is deeply incompatible with determinism and with the deterministic picture yielded by the sciences. They argue that ascriptions of full

responsibility for actions cannot properly be made, since we cannot do otherwise than what the constraints of our given psychological and motivational makeup allow us to do.[5] More basically, we are unable to be different from what we are, and unable to do otherwise than what we in fact do – at least in the strong sense of being able to do otherwise than what we do that is required by those who defend human agency (that is, the freedom to assume alternative ways of life, life plans, and moral outlooks).

In addition to this, hard determinists argue that because our psychologies are the products of antecedent conditions and forms of conditioning in which our volition and choice played little or no part, it is as senseless to blame people if they are unable to change themselves as it is to praise them if they are successful.[6] This is because the very ability and motivation that is required to modify inherited character traits is itself a product of heredity or childhood conditioning, which are factors over which we initially have no control.[7]

SELF-DETERMINATION: A GENERAL FORMULATION

Defenders of human agency like Kant and Sartre are concerned to show that we are not helpless prisoners of our character, past, or biology, or vehicles of impersonal historical forces and that our reasons and choices are not mere rationalizations for behavior that we would nevertheless engage in. There are a number of ways to theorize this, but the general approach adopted by Kant and Sartre postulates that qua selves or persons, we are unique agents capable of determining ourselves by our own reasons, choices, and purposes. At least some of the determinants of action are internal to the self or agent in a way that physical causes and antecedent conditions are not. This means that we can, at a level we consider morally significant, determine ourselves "from the inside," without being fully influenced by alien forces (external or internal). We are, within bounds, authors of our own life histories and moral being, because we contribute through our own actions, choices, or intentions to the making of what, qua moral agents, we are.

The idea that we can determine ourselves from the inside supposes that a certain subset of our beliefs, emotions, and attitudes, as well as a certain subset of our emotional and motivational disposi-

tions, are not given as unchangeable natural characteristics, like eye color or brain size or skeletal structure (what Sartre calls "facticity"). It supposes that we do not *have* these characteristics *simpliciter* (that is to say, that we are wholly one with them), but have a *relation* to them, by virtue of which reflexivity we are capable of being different from them.

The connection between reflexivity and action may be clarified by considering how certain objects are characterizable by reference to a core of determinate properties, which are more or less fixed and given to them. A bit of wood, for instance, can be adequately characterized by listing such properties as its genetic and biochemical composition. People, by contrast, are more than they appear to be, supposing that a similar inventory of de facto properties were to be attempted. They are not exhaustively characterized by fixed and given characteristics (that is, by their facticity), but are also constituted in some way by what Sartre calls their possibilities – by what they are aiming at, or beginning, or projecting themselves toward.

This is an important distinction for moral philosophy: If what we are is constituted to a certain extent by our projects and goals, then it is always open to us to consider who we are in light of who we might want to become, or who we should become. We are capable of raising morally evaluative questions like "What do I really want to do with my life?" – questions that, in Sartre's terminology, effect a "rupture" with the given. In doing this, we are exercising a capacity that may be unique to persons, namely the capacity to question,[8] to step back from and reflect upon many of our beliefs, desires, and emotions, and many of the traits, dispositions, and motivational patterns we find outselves with, and then to form higher order evaluations, preferences, or choices regarding which of them we want to be constitutive of our identity as persons and moral agents.[9]

Although the precise nature of this reflexive capacity is subject to dispute by a number of contemporary philosophers – who describe it variously as strong evaluation,[10] rational reflective self-evaluation,[11] second-order desire,[12] participatory reflection,[13] reflexive knowledge,[14] radical choice – it is generally agreed that it has the power to alter and reshape its objects. Fundamental changes in the way we evaluate, reflect upon, or understand such things as our way of life, our relations with others, our emotions, our final ends and our death necessarily occasion changes in who we are; that is, the object of

evaluation or reflection, and the evaluating or reflecting subject, change and extend their range together. Because we are capable of thinking about who we are in light of certain de jure questions, and because we can shape ourselves on the basis of these thoughts and evaluations, we can be considered responsible for ourselves in a way that many other creatures cannot.

Obviously, this general formulation of the idea of self-determination leaves unanswered the question of the depth of interdependence between self-knowledge and self-formation. The weak view is that it extends only to some of our actions, beliefs, and desires. A stronger version holds that it covers certain aspects of the motivational and psychological makeup from which our actions and desires spring. A still stronger version holds that the control we can exert goes "all the way down": that is, that we are capable of making choices and initiating actions that involve the deepest levels of our being.

It is this latter view that is of interest to philosophers of existence like Sartre and Heidegger, who argue that it is entirely up to us to determine (in a moral and existential sense) what kind of being we are going to be. They claim that unlike many other creatures, we do not exist in a straightforward de facto sense. That is, it is not the case that we are, and can only be, what we are; it would be more accurate to say that we have ourselves *to be*, or that we have our own existence to *assume*. The unavoidable split or *décalage* between an existent and its existence means that it is entirely our own responsibility to work out what we are going to do with fundamental life possibilities confronting us, and what basic orientation we are going to take in the face of existence.[15]

Sartre therefore follows Kant in defending the general idea that qua selves or persons, we are unique agents capable of determining ourselves by our own choices, intentions, reasons, and purposes. Like Kant, he also addresses the problem of determinism, arguing that these identity-shaping choices are not themselves caused by previous events or antecedent conditions in accordance with the laws of nature.[16] This does not mean, however, that Sartre accepts the radical libertarian view that our choices are matters of mere chance, or random breaks in the causal network (cf. *BN*, p. 437) – a view that he emphatically denies. His argument, rather, is that the self or person enjoys a special kind of agency, wherein the ultimate

determinants of its actions are its own choices, intentions, and purpose. By postulating the existence of a special deep-lying or transcendental source of agency, Sartre, like Kant, believes that some of the fears about diminished responsibility and agency can be allayed; for then a distinction can be generated between actions that are ultimately determined by causal forces alien to ourselves (including certain internal forces), and actions that are determined ultimately *by* ourselves *for* ourselves – that is, by the real, or transcendental, or existentially authentic, or self-determining agent.

Sartre's idea that the ultimate determinants of an agent's actions are his or her own choices, intentions, and purposes can be spelled out in a different way. At a certain depth, human agency is explained by itself, and no further explanation is possible. The explanation of a particular action, for example, will refer to an agent's desires in a given situation, the explanation of which will refer to a larger frame of attitudes, dispositions, and beliefs, which in turn will refer to a larger framework of projects. Ultimately this chain of explanation will terminate, not in something external and antecedent to the agent (in facticity, or in the causal iceberg), but in the agent itself. Whatever lies at these depths, Sartre argues, it must be fundamental; that is, it must represent the most basic set of terms by means of which we, qua moral agents, define ourselves; and it must not be derived from or conditioned by anything else. In Kantian terms – and Sartre's argument has a strong Kantian bearing here – it must represent the condition of possibility of personal experience.

Before continuing, it is worth pointing out two problems with the Kantian and Sartrean idea of a special form of agency. The first is its uncritical acceptance of the incompatibility of freedom and determinism, and its assumption that a kind of absolute Maginot line has to be established to protect the realm of human agency from the realm of the causally determined. The assumption here is that human agency cannot be built up from some initially unfree or non-agential material. The second is a problem of infinite regress: Even if our actions are explained by some deeper agency, then what explains this deeper agency? However many levels of agency are postulated, there will still be a level inviting the question "What explains it?" To be consistent, the source of agency must in turn be explained, and ultimately this must be by something external and antecedent to it – unless one holds the implausible thesis that self or agent, like

a god, is its *own* ground and source of being. Some of these problems
are addressed in Sartre's later work.

RADICAL CHOICE AND THE FUNDAMENTAL PROJECT

What is the nature of the special deep source of agency that Sartre
reserves only for the human agent? In virtue of what are we ulti-
mately self-determining? Sartre's views on this source of agency are
much less rationalistic than Kant's, for he emphasizes the deeply
futural, prerational, existentially contingent, epistemically limited,
and desire-based nature of our capacity for self-determination and
autonomy, namely the radical choice of self and the fundamental
project.

Sartre argues that our identities as persons and moral agents are
not ready-made, imposed, or discovered; nor are they the product of
conditioning, genetic inheritance, neurophysiology, or an economy
of unconscious drives. Instead, they are chosen as a kind of ultimate
end, and the way this choice of identity is realized across many years
of experience is best characterized in teleological terms as a kind of
project; that is, it is a long-term endeavor of making ourselves who
we are.

Sartre likens our capacity to determine our personal identities by
choice to the creation of an artwork (for example, the relation be-
tween a sculptor and his or her block of marble).[17] In both cases order
must be created from a raw material that to a certain extent un-
derdetermines the final form (but which does not afford complete
arbitrariness); in both cases a certain constructive process is re-
quired of the sculptor-agent; in both cases he or she can evaluate,
criticize, and deliberate about the ongoing process of the creation;
and in both cases the sculptor alone can be considered responsible
for the finished product. (The analogy would clearly be a misleading
one if restrictions were not placed upon the plasticity of the raw
material and upon the constructive powers of the sculptor.)

We make ourselves and define our way of life by projecting our-
selves toward the future, and by constantly going beyond the given
situation in which we find ourselves. The multifarious actions, de-
sires, beliefs, and experiences our lives comprise must, in Sartre's
words, "derive their meaning from an original projection" that we
make of ourselves (*BN*, p. 39). Given this strong teleological organiza-

tion, our life histories are best characterized as coherent long-term projects that exhibit an inner dynamic and intelligibility, rather than as a series of events strung loosely together, in blind or mechanical response to external events and antecedent conditions. Projection toward the future is the way in which order and meaning are created from the "raw" psychological, existential, and historical material of life; it is the way a future is fashioned. Merleau-Ponty captures a sense of this:

One day, once and for all, something was set in motion which, even during sleep, can no longer cease to see or not to see, to feel or not to feel, to suffer or be happy, to think or rest from thinking, in a word to "have it out" with the world. There then arose, not a new set of sensations or states of consciousness, not even a new monad or a new perspective . . . [but] a *fresh possibility of situations*. . . . There was henceforth a new "setting," the world received a fresh layer of meaning.[18]

The explanatory power Sartre attributes to the concepts of the choice of self and the fundamental project is vast, and the claims he makes about them have clearly transcendental import: The project is "the original relation which the for-itself chooses with its facticity and with the world" (*BN*, p. 457). It concerns "not my relations with this or that particular object in the world, but my total being-in-the-world" (p. 480). Again, it is the "primary project which is recognized as the project which can no longer be interpreted in terms of any other and which is total" (p. 479). Finally, in distinctly Kantian terms, he claims that "what makes all experience possible is . . . an original upsurge of the for-itself as presence to the object which is not" (p. 176).

To complicate matters, Sartre makes a number of puzzling claims about responsibility for self and moral desert, which reflect his conviction that since we choose ourselves absolutely, we must be responsible in an absolute sense. In making these claims, he widens the scope of moral responsibility far beyond what we normally consider tenable, and in apparent defiance of a large class of moral excusing and exempting conditions under which we view certain actions. We are, he claims, totally responsible for ourselves, including those things that befall us (cf. *BN*, pp. 553–6); we are responsible for all aspects of our situation; there are no accidents in life; and we always have the sort of lives we deserve. The assump-

tion seems to be that unless we make ourselves absolutely, we could not be responsible at all.

To clarify some of these sweeping claims, the concepts of the choice of self and the project will be explored in greater detail, and then examined vis-à-vis the issues of moral reasoning and self-knowledge.

Sartre conceives the fundamental project in strong holistic terms as an interconnected system of relations. Every aspect of a person's life – profession, tastes, choice of friends, habits – expresses a "thematic organization and an inherent meaning in this totality" (*BN*, p. 468). With the right method, the structure of a person's whole way of life and way of being can be discerned in a single act. A particular case of jealousy, for instance, "signifies for the one who knows how to interpret it, the total relation to the world by which the subject constitutes himself as a self" (p. 563).

Despite his various descriptions of the project as the "transcendent meaning" of each concrete desire, and as the "center of reference for an infinity of polyvalent meanings," Sartre vigorously rejects the idea of a transcendental ego or essential self – some transcendent pole to which all experience must necessarily refer, or to which it must belong. The unity and interconnectedness of a person's way of being do not come from the top down, but are functions of the relations *between* the many different aspects of life experience. Even the psychophysical ego, which might be thought to serve as the naturally given anchor for character predicates, and as the seat of psychological unity, is merely a synthetic and ideal construct that appears only upon a constructive (and "impure") reflection. Sartre argues that the ego is an object of conscious experience, but not a real structure that is coextensive or autochthonous with it.[19]

Second, the project is actively constructed, and not given or fixed. The numerous antecedent conditions that are ordinarily construed as having a causal influence in the formation of our identity (such as genetic, environmental, and social factors) affect us not for what they are in themselves, but for what we make of them insofar as we project ourselves beyond them, confer meaning upon them, and construct from them a signifying situation. Sartre grants to causal forces only an attenuated role vis-à-vis the original and constructive powers that we bring to bear on them. The environment, for example,

"can act on the subject only to the extent that he comprehends it; that is, transforms it into a situation" (p. 572).

The idea that we do not passively submit to an external schema of causation, but define ourselves by our project beyond it, does not mean that the choice we make of ourselves occurs in a causal vacuum. Obviously we do not choose our parents, or our biological and neurological makeup; we find ourselves "thrown into" a situation, and endowed with certain brute characteristics (that is, facticity). But factical characteristics to a certain extent underdetermine how we *assume* them, find meaning and moral significance in them, and take them up as part of a whole way of life. They do not come ready-made, or with labels on them. One of the illustrations Sartre provides is the case of physical disability:

Even this disability from which I suffer I have assumed by the very fact that I live; I surpass it toward my own projects, I make of it the necessary obstacle for my being, and I cannot be crippled without choosing myself as crippled. This means that I choose the way in which I constitute my disability (as "unbearable," "humiliating," "to be hidden," "to be revealed to all," "an object of pride," "the justification for my failures," etc.). (*BN*, p. 328)

We alone can create the *meaning* of the ensemble of factical conditions that root us in a particular situation: We are, in Sartre's words, the beings who transform our being into meaning, and through whom meaning comes into the world.[20] Sartre's indebtedness to the Kantian and Husserlian theory of *sinngebung* (meaning-giving) and transcendental constitution is plainly evident here: The creation of meaning is not itself something that can be adequately characterized in causal terms, as part of nature's causal network. It is an ontologically primitive and underived process. Strangely, we are also unaware of ourselves as being the deep source of meaning; our prereflective experience (as Nietzsche and Husserl also remarked) tends to dissimulate its own meaning-conferring and organizational activity. We tend to be naive realists, assuming uncritically that our thought pictures a world that is always and already divided up at its true joints, as if the meanings and distinctions we find in objects are there as brute, mind-independent givens.

Finally, Sartre is careful to divest his claims about the project from the foundationalist claims characteristic of certain traditional kinds of moral philosophy. The choice we make of ourselves, "that by

which all foundations and all reasons come into being" (p. 479), is not itself founded, and is in no way a source of absolute epistemic or moral certainty. It is not made of the "purest crystal, the hardest thing there is" (Wittgenstein). As a kind of "groundless ground," or contingent foundation, it is fragile and ever-diremptable. Paradoxical as this may sound, it brings out the sense in which there is nothing deeper than radical choice that might in turn define it. Radical choice functions as the unsupported "bedrock" of a whole complexly interrelated way of being in the world. This explains Sartre's claim that the "absolute event or for-itself is contingent in its very being" (BN, p. 82), even if it is "its own foundation qua for-itself" (p. 84).[21] Sartre's rejection of all forms of essentialism and foundationalism means that the hold we have over our identity is much more tenuous than we like to think: Nothing concerning our identity as persons and moral agents is immune to change or radical revision.

FOUNDATIONALISM AND THE CHOICE OF SELF

Major life changes are common phenomena. People find themselves at crossroads in their lives, often not knowing what they really want or in what direction they should best go. Over time, they develop into better or worse persons, undergo conversions, adopt new religious or moral beliefs, slowly break free of negative emotional patterns, and make fresh starts. If, as Sartre argues, the fundamental projects that describe their life histories are not grounded, are the changes they undergo changes from one project to another, or changes *within* a single project? To what extent can people actually control these changes, through deliberation, moral reflection, and searching for rational justification? And to what extent are they responsible for what they become?

Some of these questions might be clarified by considering in greater detail Sartre's theory about the ultimate groundlessness of the roots of our way of being in the world. The metaphor of bedrock is a felicitous one here, for it evokes a suggestive image of autonomy: Bedrock is that upon which other things rest, without itself resting upon anything. The choice of self that serves as Sartre's model for self-determination is autonomous in roughly this sense; our basic way of being in the world, our very connection to exis-

tence, is constituted ultimately by the choice we make of ourselves, and this does not rest upon or refer to anything more fundamental. We apprehend this choice, Sartre claims, "as not deriving from any prior reality . . ." (BN, p. 464); it is so deep-rooted and autonomous ("*selbstandig*") that it "does not imply any other meaning, and . . . refers only to itself" (p. 457).

These are clearly transcendental claims. The idea that the most fundamental relation we have to existence is not cognitive or epistemic or rational, but one that these relations *themselves* rest upon and that makes them possible (namely choice and projection), is a transcendental claim in the sense that it is about what is basic to all human experience; it refers to the *whole* of our form or framework of personal experience, and not to any particular content within that experience. That is, the relation is not an empirical one because it is not built up from and gradually shaped by years and years of accumulated particular experiences. It is, rather, a constitutive feature of these empirical experiences, and so it is not something that from within experience, or on the basis of experience, can become grounded.

MORAL REASONING

One way to clarify these transcendental claims is to consider some of their practical consequences. The validity and efficacy of moral reasoning in ordinary decision making provides a good test case, for it involves such activities as deliberating about morally conflicting courses of action, engaging in moral argument and discussion with other people, weighing pros and cons, and searching for the moral and rational justification of our choices. Sartre argues that *within* a way of life, when means and not ultimate priorities are in question, choices about conflicting courses of action may be guided by deliberation, moral argument, or the search for rational justification.[22] The controversial point he makes, however, is that moral reasoning at this level has signficance only insofar as it *presupposes* a prior commitment to a whole way of life and way of being – a commitment that is not itself something at which we have arrived by moral reasoning or deliberating or searching for moral justification. This underlying and often implicit background commitment makes possi-

ble certain kinds of moral argument and justification about a num-
ber of normative issues that are internal to a way of life, but it is not
itself an appropriate subject of argument and justification.[23]

Sartre's restriction of the scope of moral reasoning to local or
internal issues reveals just how deep rooted and primary he consid-
ers the commitment to a way of life, and the choice of self, to be. His
claim that the choice of self is a choice of what will actually *count* as
reasons for us (*BN*, pp. 461–2) suggests that we alone choose what
rules of argumentation, and what moral conflict-resolution proce-
dures, we will agree to be bound by; and, more generally, that we
alone choose what will count as a relevant moral concern among the
vast spectrum of possible normative concerns. In his own words, the
choice of self is "that by which all foundations and all reasons come
into being" (p. 479). Such is its depth that it is "prior to logic"; it is a
"prelogical synthesis" that "decides the attitude of the person when
confronted with logic and principles." For this reason, "there can be
no possibility of questioning it in conformance to logic" (p. 570).

These are strong claims and appear to lend to Sartre's account of
self-determination an antirationalist air. They leave a noticeable
gap, for instance, for the probing and fundamental "external" ques-
tions that we sometimes raise about our lives as a whole, questions
like "What should I do with my life?" "Who am I in all of this?" and
"Who should I be?" These questions are *about* our projects, or our
ways of life, or our basic moral frameworks in their entirety; they
are not meant to *presuppose* them. They express our desire to find
lasting and independent (or noncircular) reasons and moral grounds
for what we are doing with our lives; but Sartre's claim that the
choice of self is a choice of the very forms of reasoning we will
countenance seems to deny just this.

Sartre's point, however, is not that the attempt to work out these
deep questions will turn out to be meaningless or wholly arbitrary;
or that they are unanswerable, and that we are left in the dark. It is
rather that in the process of working out these issues, the choices
and actions we make that involve the deepest level of our being
cannot be determined entirely on objective and rational grounds.
Eventually, we will find that the search for justification, and the
moral reasoning in which we engage, just comes to an end, and we
are thrown upon our own finite and fallible resources; action begins

where reflection leaves off.[24] It is at this stage, as Heidegger, Sartre, and others argue, that the basic questions of existence can be worked out *only* by existing.

Limitations like these are not only signs of our cognitive short-comings, the poverty of our rationality, or (as Hume would argue) the preponderance of emotional, affective, and habitual factors in our makeup; nor are they only a function of our finite temporal perspective – that is, the fact that our lives are too short, and the future too pressing, to bother too much with reflection. They reveal the deep formal properties and inner structure of any individual's way of life: Questions of moral and rational justification are neces-sarily *internal* to a way of life (or to the project or basic moral framework), but as a whole, a way of life does not afford external rational justification.[25] This is another way of arriving at the idea that the radical choice is a groundless ground.

This view is not without problems. While Sartre clearly wishes to avoid underpinning his theory of self-determination with an un-checked subjectivism, it is still not entirely clear precisely where he allows moral reasoning and rational justification to leave off and choice to take over. The idea that there is both an objective and subjective side to self-determination is not deeply controversial; what is, however, is the question of the scope and force of the subjec-tive and irreducibly decisionistic element that comes into play when we exercise a choice with regard to our fundamental life possibilities.

Part of Sartre's unclarity about the line between the objective and subjective in self-determination is a function of his peculiar choice of examples, many of which focus on the extremes of human behav-ior, or upon the lives of extraordinary individuals (mostly French male writers). To see this bias, one need only look at his account of situations of extreme moral conflict.

MORAL REASONING IN EXTREME SITUATIONS

If Sartre is right in arguing that the choice of self is that which makes possible moral reasoning about project-internal concerns but is not itself an appropriate subject of moral argument and justifica-tion, then it would allow that moral reasoning *across* different ways of life and moral frameworks is bound to incur question-begging and

confusion (rather like scientists in different paradigms talking at cross-purposes). This is clearly illustrated in situations of extreme moral conflict, when ultimate priorities are called into question.

A well-known instance of this is Sartre's case of the young man in occupied France who finds himself at a critical turning point in his life: He is forced to choose between joining the Resistance and taking care of his aged mother.[26] Here, the conflict of duties, responsibilities, and moral intuitions is ultimately a conflict between two ways of life, and not a conflict between moral claims within a single way of life. The man is forced to choose between two different moral practices, and two different moral environments, and the virtues and vices that will come to characterize his future actions are correspondingly divergent: In the one case, courage, dedication, selflessness, and loyalty, as well as willingness to kill, deceive, and betray; in the other case, friendship, affection, and honesty.[27] The force of Sartre's example is clear: The choice between these different ways of life is ultimately a choice between two possible types of person, for which there is no conceivably common decision criterion. Commenting upon Sartre's example, Stuart Hampshire has noted that a choice of this depth leaves the young man feeling that he has denied or negated a part of himself.

A person hesitates between two contrasting ways of life, and sets of virtues, and he has to make a very definite, and even final, determination between them. The determination is a negation, and normally the agent will feel that the choice has killed, or repressed, some part of him.[28]

The decision is a particularly torturous one because the man's moral inquiry and reasoning about which of the two courses to follow inevitably comes to an unsatisfactory end. Sartre allows that he *could* guide his inquiry and eventual choice by relying upon Christian doctrine, Kantian ethics, or general principles of utility. But the abstractness of their principles in specific and highly complex historical situations unavoidably underdetermines his final choice, and requires an element of interpretation and decision on his own part. Again, a choice made on the basis of trusting his feelings will itself rest on a prior choice about what counts as a morally significant feeling. Careful, rational, intellectual deliberation is equally unhelpful, for if he engages in deliberation, it is simply a part of his original

project to realize motives by means of deliberation rather than some other form of discovery (for example, by passion or action).[29] When a person deliberates, Sartre claims, the "chips are down" (BN, p. 451).

In the final instance, when he is faced with a choice of whether or not to accept a way of life, moral argument, deliberation, and searching for rational justification come to an end.[30] He finds himself at the very end point of a whole way of seeing and doing things, and he must choose from a perspective characterized by ignorance, epistemic finitude, existential contingency, and moral uncertainty. Accompanying this is the stark realization that however sure and well-made his choice may appear to be, it is neither self-justifying nor supported by an external foundation. There is no possibility of putting his choice of a way of life on a secure and rational foundation.

Who could help him choose? . . . Nobody. . . . I had only one answer to give: "You're free, choose, that is, invent." No general ethics can show you what is to be done; there are no omens in the world. The Catholics will reply, "But there are." Granted – but, in any case, I myself choose the meaning they have.[31]

SELF-KNOWLEDGE

One can't take a point of view on one's life without one's living it.
– Sartre

Sartre further develops his picture of persons as finite, deeply situated, prerational, and epistemically limited beings in his account of self-knowledge. A number of activities are involved in searching for self-knowledge, namely trying to identify and describe with some acuity what we are doing with our lives, what things we hold most valuable, what our deeper feelings are, where our moral and cognitive limits lie, and how we stand as moral agents in interpersonal and communal relations. These activities are intimately linked to self-determination and responsibility, and therefore to the attainment of moral virtue. Searching for self-knowledge is an essential component of moral reflection about our fundamental life possibilities, and is propaedeutic to the choices we make that involve the deepest level of our being; it is also essential to "owning up" and overcoming self-deception, and to facing death.

But self-knowledge is a notoriously difficult task, which most of

us put off. Not only do we commonly lack the requisite investigative
and moral resolve to follow through with these issues; we also face
the problem of a kind of "reflexive feedback loop," for we are at once
the knower and the known, and changes in the way we come to
identify, discriminate, and describe our states of mind and our experi-
ences often produce changes in those very states.[32] Our situation as
self-inquirers resembles that of the traveler who pushes into a chang-
ing countryside that is altered by his or her very advance. Self-
knowledge, in other words, is both discovery and creation.

Sartre's account of self-knowledge shows just how limited our
attempts must be when we try to work out the fundamental "exter-
nal" questions that we sometimes raise about the whole of our way
of life, individual life history, or basic moral framework. He argues
that the global architecture of our way of being is elusive and easily
overlooked, not because it is hidden and recessed like some dark
secret in the soul, but because it is so close to us: It is the always
presupposed background or horizon of our life experience, but it
cannot be fully spelled out and articulated insofar as it remains
presupposed. To indicate this, Sartre calls the fundamental project a
"mystery in broad daylight" (BN, p. 571), implying that its imma-
nence and sheer proximity is the source of our constant epistemic
oversight and undersight. But he also wishes to imply that we al-
ways already understand the project, even if not in a clear, explicit,
or propositionalizable way.

There is certainly an element of truth here: With respect to know-
ing what we are really up to, and who we are in the midst of all the
actions, interactions, and experiences that make up our lives, we
often cannot see the forest for the trees. Because we are so immersed
in day-to-day living, the broader picture, the deeper truths, and the
important patterns in our lives often escape explicit notice and recog-
nition. In some instances this is not without practical and psycho-
logical advantage: Certain kinds of self-ignorance and self-deception
have a strong adaptive function, even in our endeavor to become
more autonomous.[33] And yet, continuing the metaphor, it would
clearly be counterintuitive to characterize ourselves as being entire
strangers to the forest which we overlook. Somehow, in inexplicit,
vague, and indirect ways, we sense or intuit or embody the broader
picture and the deeper truths, while not knowing them as such or
being able to put them into propositional form. In addition to this,

we are at times granted flashing self-insights of unparalleled depth, which slip away even as we try to express and articulate them.[34]

Sartre preserves the intuition that we are somehow attuned to the deeper truths about ourselves. Such is the scope of his concept of consciousness that he can claim that the fundamental project is fully experienced by us. By this he means that we have a deep "lived" sense and tacit understanding (*compréhension*) of ourselves and our "ownmost possibility of being"; we do not have to search the depths "without ever having any presentiment of [their] location, as one can go to look for the source of the Nile or the Niger" (p. 569). But this self-experience tends to give us both too much and too little of what we need for a clear and accurate self-knowledge. On the one hand, it is tacit and undeveloped, and effaced by the objects of our awareness: Sartre calls it variously "pre-reflective," "non-thetic," "non-positional," and non-analytical, thereby linking it to his version of the Heideggerean concept of preontological comprehension.[35] On the other hand, our prereflective self-consciousness presents everything "all at once" (p. 571; cf. also p. 155), in a state of extreme indifferentiation, "without shading, without relief. . . . All is there" (p. 571).

To complicate measures, Sartre places tight restrictions on the scope of our reflexive *knowledge*, by drawing a sharp distinction between knowledge (*connaissance*) and consciousness (*conscience*). His aim in establishing the divergence between knowledge and consciousness in reflexive matters is to show that while the fundamental characteristics of our way of being in the world are fully experienced by us, and understood in a tacit and incipient way, we do not objectively know them as such. This is stronger than the empirical claim that we generally tend to avoid self-examination and "owning up," or that we often lack the tools necessary for identifying and conceptualizing the deeper choices we have made of ourselves. It is the claim that objective knowledge can *only* reveal the project from an external point of view – a view that of necessity fails to capture the full sense of our experience; it cannot reveal the project from the inside, as it is for itself.

[We] are always wholly present to ourselves; but precisely because we are wholly present, we cannot hope to have an analytical and detailed consciousness of what we are. Moreover this consciousness can be only non-thetic. (p. 463)

[If] the fundamental project is fully experienced by the subject and hence wholly conscious, that certainly does not mean that it must at the same time be known by him; quite the contrary. (p. 570)

The idea that the fundamental project is lived but not known does not entail the stronger skeptical conclusion that the project is un-knowable. The fact that we cannot objectively *know* our project from the inside – that is, study it, analyze it, and conceptualize it insofar as we live it – is rather like the fact that the eye cannot simultaneously see itself seeing – which clearly does not imply that it is invisible.[36] In both cases, however, we can only know it from the outside and at a distance, as another person knows it; that is, as a kind of quasi-object. We cannot fully capture and explicate what is lived prereflectively, and understood tacitly, and this epistemic bar-rier includes those very truths and important patterns in virtue of which so much of our lives are prereflective. "What always escapes these methods of investigation is the project as it is for itself, the complex in its own being. This project-for-itself can be experienced only as a living possession . . ." (p. 571). Epistemically, we suffer a blind spot to the project: We are "able to apprehend it only by living it" (p. 463).[37]

This blind spot is found even in self-analysis, where we are both analyst and analysand. The process of articulating, deciphering, and conceptualizing our tacit preunderstanding and self-experience un-avoidably leads us further away from the lived, immediate, first-person perspective, and forces us to take an external, mediated, and partially falsifying perspective on ourselves.

A good comparison for my efforts to apprehend myself and their futility might be found in that sphere described by Poincaré in which the tempera-ture decreases as one goes from its center to its surface. Living beings at-tempt to arrive at the surface of this sphere by setting out from its center, but the lowering of the temperature produces in them a continually increas-ing contraction. They tend to become infinitely flat proportionately to their approaching their goal, and because of this fact they are separated by an infinite distance. (p. 286)

These epistemic restrictions may seem counterproductive, given that the central principle of Sartre's existential psychoanalysis is that everything about a person can be communicated, and given that a properly conducted "regressive analysis" will lead us back to the

"the original relation which the for-itself chooses with its facticity and with the world" (p. 457). They are not, however, inconsistent with Sartre's overall enterprise of establishing a philosophy of existence. For just as he is critical of the claim of reason, so he is critical of the claims made by epistemology, which, he argues, unjustifiably privileges knowledge over being ["the illusion of the primacy of knowledge" (p. xxviii)].

Perhaps aware of the epistemic restrictions placed on self-knowledge by the dichotomy between the project-as-lived and the project-as-known, and still wishing to allow room for a practical self-insight that would have far-reaching moral consequences, Sartre introduced the possibility of "purifying reflection." Possessing some of the characteristics of genuine existential psychoanalytical self-insight, when the analysand not only acknowledges the truth of the analyst's interpretation, but lives and embodies it, a purifying self-reflection would be a nonobjectifying and nondistancing "spelling-out" of our self-experience and our tacit, preontological self-understanding; it would be the moment when knowledge *becomes* decision, and when reflection coincides with action. Because the demands on the notion of purifying reflection were so high, and because the dichotomies between the reflective and the prereflective, and the lived and the known, were so sharply drawn, it remained an undeveloped but insinuating theme in *Being and Nothingness:* It was a kind of promissory note rather than a theory of self-knowledge.

It is important to note that the wide-ranging power Sartre attributes to the concept of consciousness, and to the irreducibility of subjective experience, is purchased at the expense of a narrow model of knowledge (*connaissance*). Knowledge as he conceives it is "thetic," "positional," and analytical. It is based on a subject–object dualism, and it presupposes "reliefs, levels, an order, hierarchy" (p. 155). Moreover, knowledge is so structured that it can apprehend its object only from the outside, at a distance. Sartre obviously derives this model of knowledge from the objective causal analysis that characterizes the natural scientific viewpoint; and, with other phenomenologists and antireductionists, he claims that causal analysis falsifies subjective experience, or fails to capture its real nature.[38] While his overriding intent is clear – to show that knowledge is only a "founded mode of being" (Heidegger) – his model unjustifiably ignores a number of dif-

ferent forms of knowledge, not all of which are analytical, dualistic, or abstract (such as tacit knowledge, knowledge how to do something, moral knowledge), and not all of which are reducible to preontological comprehension.

Furthermore, the idea that prereflective experience is sharply distinct from knowledge fails to account for the fact that certain kinds of experience are conceptually and theoretically mediated. As with scientific theories proper, observation is often shaped by conceptualization and theoretical construct. What we notice about our feelings, desires, beliefs, and other higher order intentional states, and how we interpret them, often involves a conceptual and theoretical element, which enables us inter alia to generalize beyond what is immediately given, to identify long-term patterns, and to sum up and simplify initially diverse events.[39] The theoretical element in turn shapes our experiences, which become integrated again into the repertoire of prereflective experience. Under certain conditions, changes in the way we conceptualize and theorize our experience are accompanied by changes in the nature of experience itself.

PROBLEMS WITH SARTRE'S EARLY MORAL PSYCHOLOGY

Sartre's denial of the efficacy of moral reasoning, his holist approach to life architecture, and the constraints he places upon self-knowledge, create serious problems for the explanatory scope of his moral psychology. Most notably, it has difficulty explaining the many different forms of psychological and moral development that occur across an individual's life history.

Rather like the theory of incommensurability and meaning-variance that is designed to account for large-scale changes in scientific paradigms,[40] Sartre's theory of the project commits him to holding that changes in the way we shape our lives are discontinuous and ultimately unjustifiable. New identities and ways of life do not grow or evolve from previous ones, as if they were articulations of an underlying and self-same reality.[41] Nor are they formed gradually as a result of prolonged moral reflection and attention.[42] The clearest example of life change on Sartre's model is the radical conversion, when a person adopts an entirely new way of life all at

once (p. 464). This involves a total break with the past, a complete reinterpretation of the meaning of past events and present situations, and the adoption of an entirely new moral framework. A global flip-flop like this is liable to happen in an instant.

These extraordinary and marvelous instants when the prior project collapses into the past in the light of a new project which rises on its ruins and which as yet exists only in outline, in which humiliation, anguish, joy, hope, are delicately blended, in which we let go in order to grasp and grasp in order to let go – these have often appeared to furnish the clearest and most moving image of our freedom. (p. 476)

The problems with this view of life change, identity, and self-determination are obvious: It is too extreme – what Iris Murdoch has called "a grandiose leaping about unimpeded at important moments"[43] – and results in what Sartre later called a "revolutionary and discontinuous catastrophism."[44] The architecture of a life is at once too rigid and too fragile. With no middle ground between change and constancy, and no solid foundation, the integration of the project stands precariously balanced against its complete disintegration. Moreover, the "price" of changing the project is too high (p. 454): Given its interconnectedness, if anything is to change, everything must change. Problems like these are not unexpected consequences from a theory that refuses to give a balanced role to rationality and to the power of knowledge. Sartre was aware of some of these problems:

I was often told that the past drives us forward, but I was convinced that I was being drawn by the future. I would have hated to feel quiet forces at work within me, the slow development of my natural aptitudes. . . . I subordinated the past to the present and the present to the future; I transformed a quiet evolutionism into a revolutionary and discontinuous catastrophism. A few years ago, someone pointed out to me that the characters in my plays and novels make their decisions abruptly and in a state of crisis, that, for example, in The Flies, a moment is enough for Orestes to effect his conversion. Of course! Because I create them in my own image; not as I am, but as I wanted to be.[45]

In the end, the fact that the theory of the project can only allow changes that are global, and not gradual, piecemeal, self-willed, or rationally governed, is contrary to Sartre's stated aim of showing

how we can be self-determining agents. First, it results in a kind of determinism by the fundamental project. Once it is chosen, we are virtually locked into our project, and our voluntary and rationally planned efforts to change its basic structures are futile. When we deliberate about alternative ways of life, the "chips are down." We can only hope for a radical conversion – but even this hoping involves circular reasoning, for it is an expression and realization of our current project.[46]

Second, Sartre's restrictions on rationality have the unwanted consequence of making self-determination an unintelligible and nonrational achievement. With no recourse to objective and noncircular evaluation, and the rationally guided formulation of choices between different ways of life, the question "What is best for me?" is not rationally decidable. The history of personal changes that we undergo across our lives is a history of brute facts. We cannot find any lasting and project-independent reason why our lives take the form that they do, and why certain life changes occur and others do not: Beyond the biased and revisable reasons we might formulate from within, and in terms of, our current project, we must accept these facts as ultimately inexplicable (or absurd). But this clearly runs contrary to the idea that we are self-determining, and the authors of our life histories.

It is also clearly counterintuitive, for it implies that there are no lasting and independent grounds to enable us to distinguish between the good and the better (if not best) choices that we make in determining the way of life we want. (The same holds, a fortiori, for the idea that we can distinguish between poor and poorer choices.) Nor does it allow us to say that a better choice would be evident to us in light of greater knowledge and moral understanding.[47] But this is precisely the point of postulating that we are capable of making choices that concern the deepest level of our being: For when we ask fundamental practical questions (such as "How am I going to live my life?" "What kind of life would be fulfilling, given my talents?"), we are fully aware that we can take a wrong turn and fail to lead a morally significant and morally flourishing life. And we are fully aware that in light of greater knowledge and maturity and wisdom, we actually could work out these fundamental questions with increasingly greater moral certainty and justification.

AGENCY AND SELF-DETERMINATION IN SARTRE'S
LATER WORK

Human history does not walk on its head.
                                    – Marx

Beginning with *Saint Genet* (1952), Sartre began to address some of
the problems of his earlier views on responsibility, agency, and self-
determination. *Saint Genet* introduced in largely untheorized form
the notion of the social conditioning of selfhood. It also took child-
hood seriously, thereby marking a clear improvement on *Being and
Nothingness*, where the role of ontogeny and childhood was so under-
emphasized that it seemed that the *pour-soi* emerged into the world
fully formed. It was with the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*,[48] how-
ever, that a theory of social conditioning was developed, even
though its central concern was not moral psychology.

In the *Critique* Sartre attaches a great deal of importance to the
social constitution of personal being, and to its susceptibility to
estrangement not by the complex psychological stratagems of self-
deception, but by uncontrollably powerful social forces. Moreover,
his interest is more with our practical freedom to change our situa-
tion than with our psychological or inner freedom to change our-
selves. This shift in interest reflects a response to the criticism that
the earlier conception of freedom – freedom as the ability to choose
between a number of theoretically possible ways of life at any one
moment; or to confer on things their value as causes or motives – is
merely an abstract and nonsocial form of freedom. It is also a re-
sponse to the criticism that his moral psychology failed to account
for the low probability that people actually do exercise this kind of
self-transformational freedom.

Sartre allows that individuals determine the existentially specific
character of their lives, within certain given material conditions;
but he adds that their actions, desires, and beliefs are deeply expres-
sive of, and constituted by, their class background and historical
milieu. Many of their roles and attitudes bear no mark of their own
intentional or purposive activity (p. 232), but are the impositions of
their class and other material conditions. From early childhood on-
ward people carve out their personal identities by means of and in
terms of the materials and instruments provided them by the social

environment; at the same time, they face obstacles and coun-
terfinalities that steal their praxis and seriously thwart their efforts
to become autonomous and self-directing. Sartre claims, for exam-
ple, that

> there can be no doubt that one *makes oneself* a bourgeois. In this case, every
> moment of activity is embourgeoisement. But in order to make oneself
> bourgeois, one must be bourgeois. . . . [I]ndividuals find an existence already
> sketched out for them at birth; they "have their position in life and their
> personal development assigned to them by their class" (Marx). What is
> assigned to them is . . . a fundamental *attitude*, as well as a determinate
> provision of material and intellectual tools. (p. 232, emphasis in original)

MORAL PSYCHOLOGY IN *THE FAMILY IDIOT*

The Family Idiot preserves and deepens the theory of the social
constitution of personal being, adding to its range the constitution
of the body, kinesthetic experience, and the ego construct. Sartre
shows a growing sensitivity to the brute materiality, inertia, and
opacity that affect historical reality and that deeply limit an individ-
ual's attempts to change it and win control.[49] Like large scale his-
torical processes, a human life is not something that at any one
moment can be reshaped or authenticated by radical choice. Cer-
tain forms of social conditioning of personality are so deep-rooted
and extend so far back into childhood that their effects on all subse-
quent behavior remain insurpassable: No amount of praxis will
enable us to escape their grip. This means that the endeavor to
achieve a degree of moral autonomy and personal integrity is possi-
ble only within the limits set by these forms of conditioning. In
The Family Idiot it is clear that Sartre conceives self-determination
not as a function of a choice that is ultimately underived (cf. *BN*, p.
464), as if we are possessed of the power to sculpt ourselves from
the ground up; it is a function of reworking and integrating an
already sculpted material.
   It is also clear in *The Family Idiot* that Sartre still holds that being
responsible presupposes the ability to determine the kinds of persons
we are; but with a Marxist theory of social conditioning, a theory of
childhood development and the ontogenesis of agency, and a theory of
social "predestination," the range of self-determination is heavily

restricted, and the kind of control that we can expect over our way of life and basic moral framework is not the kind achieved by radical choice. Gone are the claims about our sovereign power of choice and our virtually unlimited ability to confer new and different meanings upon situations. The notion of praxis, which replaces the notions of transcendence and choice, is a socially conditioned and wholly material process; it is no longer merely *at* the world, but *in* it.[50]

Two ideas stand out in *The Family Idiot:* first, that we are "totally conditioned" by our social existence; second, that we are free agents, and not merely vehicles for inhuman forces operating through us. Sartre wishes to show how our freedom resides not in the capacity to *transcend* our conditioning, but in our capacity to *assume* it and to make something of it. That is, he wants to show that agency is not an absolute and always presupposed given, but an achievement, a contribution that is built up in terms of our socially conditioned cognitive, emotional, motivational, and affective resources, and in terms of the practical constraints of a particular historical situation. This has important implications for moral agency and responsibility: Despite – or in virtue of – these limited resources and constraints, one is in the end "always responsible for what is made of one. Even if one can do nothing else beside assume this responsibility." To this Sartre adds:

I believe that a man can always make something out of what is made of him. This is the limit I would today accord to freedom: the small movement which makes of a totally conditioned social being someone who does not render back completely what his conditioning has given him. Which makes of Genet a poet when he had been rigorously conditioned to be a thief.[51]

This is a forceful statement, and it brings out the mistaken assumption of some forms of determinism that causal forces are purely external and mechanistic: that is, that we are the product of heredity and environment, receiving inputs but passing them on essentially unmodified by any distinctive contribution of our own. On the face of it, however, Sartre's theory of deep social conditioning is not unproblematically compatible with his theory of self-determination: for if social conditioning goes "all the way down," then the contributions we make to our identity and way of life (including our endeavors to achieve a degree of moral autonomy) must themselves be functions of

prior conditioning and numerous other antecedent conditions for which we cannot reasonably be held responsible. Moreover, the deeply constituted cognitive and psychological characteristics that we find in ourselves – "fundamental attitudes" and limited intellectual tools – must restrict us to certain ways of viewing what we might become. If this is so, then why suppose that the contribution we make to our identity – what Sartre calls the "small movement" of freedom – is really the work of our own hand, and not causal forces acting through us?

Again, on what grounds can we be held responsible for ourselves, if the theory of total social conditioning is true? If we cannot be held responsible for the antecedents of those actions, desires, and beliefs that are expressions of a socially constituted character and psychology that is not initially subject to our will or choice, then how can we be responsible even for our most basic choices and contributions, if they too are the products of prior conditions and circumstances that are outside of our control?[52]

The skeptical answer is that in the very contribution we make to our identity we are realizing at a more reflective (and rationalized) level the same socially conditioned psychological makeup that we seek to change by means of evaluation, choice, or volition. Conditioned as deeply as we are during infancy and childhood, it is not really up to us to become the persons we want to become: We can only become *what* we already are, and so it is only in an otiose sense that we can be considered self-determining and responsible. To take a concrete example: While we may be able to "step back" from some of the values, beliefs, and attitudes we have acquired in our formative years, and ask whether these are the values we really want to be defined by, the very act of standing back will itself be a product of the inculcated values that are called into question. We think and act with and in terms of these values and beliefs, not from an external perspective and not confronted with the genuine possibilities that our folk model of moral autonomy demands.

Some of Sartre's claims certainly seem to support a skepticism like this. He comments in his autobiography: "One gets rid of a neurosis, one doesn't get cured of one's self. Though they are worn out, blurred, humiliated, thrust aside, ignored, all of the child's traits are still to be found in the quinquagenarian."[53] Elsewhere he says:

We are lost during childhood. Methods of education, the parent–child rela-
tionship, and so on, are what create the self, but it's a lost self. . . . I do not
mean to say that this sort of predestination precludes all choice, but one
knows that in choosing, one will not attain what one has chosen. It is what I
call the necessity of freedom.[54]

In *The Family Idiot* Sartre goes to great lengths to show how
Flaubert is unable to transcend the conditioning (namely his consti-
tutional passivity) that makes him what he is. Flaubert will never
transcend the "sentence" of passivity, his "deep, always hidden
wound"; he is free only to assume it (*IF I*: pp. 8–9).

Flaubert's future is barred by an iron wall. . . . "You will be the family idiot."
If the child wants one day to find a way out of this, he must accept the
sentence. And whatever his chance of success, he has no hope of altering it.
(*IF I*, p. 383)[55]

Once again there seems to be an impasse between human agency
and determinism: If a special form of agency is not postulated (that
is, the self as a unique agent that determines itself by its own choice
and purposes), then we cannot "really" be considered self-
determining. We are either free and not fully subject to deterministic
forces, or we are determined and unfree; either the self is ultimately
formed *by* us – that is, determined by the self for the self – or it is
formed *for* us, by causal forces and prior conditions acting *through*
us. In either case, human freedom is supposed incompatible with
determinism.

This familiar impasse, and the Maginot line strategy it invites,
embodies a number of conceptual prejudices and confusions. One of
the most notable of these is the idea that agency must in some
absolute or primitive or underived sense be the work of our own
hand, lest it be corrupted by anything alien and nonagential. But
whatever this absolute sense might be, it rests upon an untenable
assumption, namely that genuine agenthood cannot be derived from
some initially nonagential material.

This is based on a fallacy (a version of the sorites paradox), the
argument for which runs as follows: However many contributions
to our psychological and personal makeup we have made, there
must have been a first or primitive contribution; if this was a deci-
sion or action over which we had no control (for instance, as a result

of a completely socially constituted psychology), then its product cannot be anything we are responsible for. All subsequent contributions will therefore have the same properties as the first, and such a process will never yield an action or choice by us where we can be considered responsible agents. This argument is clearly wrong: By parity of reasoning, there could not by any *Homo sapiens*, since every *Homo sapiens* must have *Homo sapiens* parents, and if one traces the family tree back far enough there must be a non-*Homo sapiens* ancestor whose offspring could not themselves be *Homo sapiens*.[56] Obviously there are *Homo sapiens*, so there must be a flaw in the argument. The error lies in the premise that unless we were absolutely responsible for making ourselves what we are, we could not be responsible at all. But nothing is ever entirely of our making, unless we are gods, so premise of the argument must be too strong.

Another notable prejudice generating the impasse, and inviting the Maginot line strategy, is the supposed incompatibility of freedom and determinism.[57] Sartre's later view postulates a much more dialectical relation between these two ways of conceiving human action, and is more closely aligned with what has traditionally been called compatibilism. This, roughly, is the view that determinism (broadly construed) is a necessary condition of freedom and human responsibility; and that it is neither necessary nor sufficient to postulate the existence of absolute or contracausal agency to explain the possibility of freedom. Versions of this view have been adopted by Hume, Marx, Engels, and Mill. Mill's compatibilist account of character clearly resembles Sartre's claims about our capacity for self-formation: A person

has, to a certain extent, a power to alter his character. Its being, in the ultimate resort, formed for him is not inconsistent with its being, in part, formed *by* him as one of the intermediate agents. His character is formed by his circumstances (including among these his particular organisation), but his own desire to mould it in a particular way is one of those circumstances, and by no means one of the least influential. . . . [If] we examine closely, we shall find that this feeling, of our being able to modify our own character *if we wish*, is itself the feeling of moral freedom which we are conscious of. A person feels morally free who feels that his habits or his temptations are not his masters but he theirs; who even in yielding to them knows that he could resist. . . .[58]

Sartre's claim that freedom is the small movement that makes of a totally conditioned social being someone who does not render back completely what their conditioning has given them does not imply that we have the godlike capacity to determine *which* characteristics of our makeup will be constitutive of ourselves. We cannot choose or rewrite our being. We do, however, have the capacity to determine *how* some of these characteristics are to be constitutive, and the domain marked out by this capacity is the domain of our moral agency and moral responsibility.

The contribution we make to what we are must be conceived as a contribution in an organizational and boot-strapping sense, rather than in the special transcendental sense of creative agency that Kant and the early Sartre postulated: It involves the reordering and transformation of an already given material with and by means of that very material. The result is a better unity and integration of already existing dispositions, character traits, emotional patterns, motivational structures, and cognitive abilities; they are preserved and reorganized, and their energies rechanneled, from the inside, and with those very energies.[59] The model of self-determination that Sartre uses here resembles in some ways Engels's (quasi-Spinozist) model:

Active social forces work exactly like natural forces: blindly, forcibly, destructively, so long as we do not understand, and reckon with them. But when once we understand them, when once we grasp their action, their direction, their effects, it depends only upon ourselves to subject them more and more to our own will, and by means of them to reach our own ends. . . . The difference is as that between the destructive force of electricity in the lightning of the storm, and the electricity under command in the telegraph and the voltaic arc. . . .[60]

The emphasis in Sartre's later moral psychology is not with the ultimate origin of our desires, acts, and mental states in a special and absolute source of agency; it is with the practical and material process of introducing order and integration into what otherwise might be "blind, forcible, and destructive." This means that the question of the responsibility that we have for our way of life and moral outlook, and the question of moral autonomy, is not answered by looking at whether it is our own ultimately self-caused or uncaused actions that lie at the source of our ways of feeling, acting, desiring,

and thinking. Such a question targets only the issue of whether we are responsible for *having* these particular characteristics.[61]

The question of moral responsibility and autonomy turns on the question of whether we have *taken* responsibility for what has already been made of us: that is, whether the deep-seated psychological characteristics, motivational patterns, and emotional tendencies we find ourselves with are characteristics that we have organized and actively taken up as part of our identity. The difference between merely having these characteristics, and actually assuming them and incorporating them as constitutive of who we are, is rather like the difference between the destructive force of electricity in the lightning of the storm, and the electricity under command in the telegraph and the voltaic arc.

NOTES

1 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, tr. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Methuen, 1969), hereafter abbreviated in text as *BN*.

2 J. P. Sartre, *L'Idiot de la famille* (Paris: Gallimard, Vols. I and II, 1971; Vol. III, 1972), hereafter abbreviated in text as *IF*, followed by volume and page number.

3 Philosophical variations of the ideal of rational moral autonomy are to be found in Lockeian, Kantian, existentialist, rationalist, and utilitarian moral thought.

4 I. Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, tr. T. Greene and H. Hudson (London: Open Court, 1934), p. 40.

5 Cf. J. Hospers, "What Means This Freedom?" and P. Edwards, "Hard and Soft Determinism," in *Determinism and Freedom in the Age of Modern Science*, ed. S. Hook (New York: Macmillan, 1958).

6 Psychopathology lends some credence to this view. People suffering from severe personality disorders are often powerless to change themselves in any significant way. In the worst cases, their life histories are composed of the repetition of the same destructive behavior patterns that were first established in an unhappy childhood; however hard they try to change, their efforts do not enable them to escape unconsciously motivated behavior.

7 Reason, considered to be a transformational and liberating force – the "master of the passions" – is virtually powerless: So deeply rooted is our psychological makeup that reasoning and the exercise of the intelligence

only give us greater facility in rationalizing behavior that we would carry out anyway.

8 Sartre argues that "human reality can detach itself from the world – in questioning, in systematic doubt, in sceptical doubt, in the *epoche*, etc. – only if by nature it has the possibility of self-detachment" (*BN*, p. 25).

9 John Locke defended a version of this: The mind has "a power to suspend the execution and satisfaction of any of its desires," and so "is at liberty to consider the objects of them, examine them on all sides, and weigh them with others. In this lies the liberty man has" (*Essay on Human Understanding*, II, XXI, p. 48).

10 C. Taylor, "Responsibility for Self," in *The Identities of Persons*, ed. A. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), and *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

11 E. Tugenhat, *Self-Consciousness and Self-Determination*, tr. P. Stern (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986).

12 H. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971).

13 D. W. Hamlyn, "Self-Knowledge," in *The Self*, ed. T. Mischel (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977); cf. also J. D. Velleman, *Practical Reflection* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989).

14 S. Hampshire, *Thought and Action* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1982).

15 This, roughly, is Heidegger's idea that Being is an issue for *Dasein*. Cf. *Being and Time*, tr. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), pp. 67–8.

16 The general formulation of self-determination is neutral on the question of determinism: It states that insofar as they are determinants of our actions, such things as choices, intentions, reasons, and purposes have as much of a role to play as those determinants that are physical causes; and that they require a different form of explanation. But this says nothing about the ultimate causal status of these determinants, or their amenability to naturalization and physicalist reduction. Conceivably, determinists, libertarians, action theorists, and compatibilists could agree on this general model of self-determination without agreeing on the causal status of the determinants.

17 J. P. Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," in *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, tr. B. Frechtman (New York: Citadel, 1957), pp. 42–3.

18 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. C. Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), pp. 406–7.

19 Cf. J. P. Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, tr. F. Williams and R. Kirkpatrick (New York: Noonday, 1957).

20 J. P. Sartre, "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal," in *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, tr. J. Matthews (London: Verso, 1983), p. 160.

21 Pascal also noted the difficulty of maintaining a coherent attitude to the curious fact that we exist at all. When viewed from afar, our lives appear to be events that lack intrinsic necessity; they are just there, as apparently gratuitous facts (Pensées, no. 208).

22 Cf. Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics, Book 3, on deliberating about means but not ends.

23 This bears resemblances to Carnap's distinction between internal and external questions, and to Popper's claim that the decision that commits us to rationality cannot itself be fully rationally justified.

24 Similarly, R. M. Hare argues that justification comes to an end when we are confronted with a decision whether to accept a way of life; only once it is accepted can justification be based upon the way of life. Cf. The Language of Morals (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 69.

25 Cf. P. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," in Proceedings of the British Academy (London: 1962) for a criticism of the idea of the external rational justification of our moral framework.

26 Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," pp. 24–9. The case resembles Kierkegaard's account of the criterionless decision between the aesthetic and ethical way of life in Either/Or.

27 S. Hampshire, Morality and Conflict (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 33.

28 Ibid., p. 155. This is suggestive of the Spinozist maxim Omnis determinatio est negatio.

29 The etymology of the term deliberation reveals something about Sartre's belief in its futility: It is de-liberation.

30 Compare this with Wittgenstein's antifoundationalism: "Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; – but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting which lies at the bottom of the language-game." (On Certainty, tr. D. Paul and G. E. Anscombe [New York: Harper & Row, 1969], p. 204).

31 Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," p. 28.

32 Cf. Hampshire's Thought and Action; cf. also C. Taylor, "Responsibility for Self."

33 Cf. A. Rorty "The Deceptive Self: Liars, Layers, and Lairs," in Perspectives on Self-Deception, ed. B. P. McLaughlin and A. O. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 11–28.

34 In The Family Idiot Sartre analyzes Flaubert's "fulgurating intuitions" – self-insights revealing everything and nothing.

35 Cf. M. Heidegger, Being and Time, pp. 32–5, 67, 317, and 414–15 for the concept of preunderstanding. Sartre construes preunderstanding in ontological rather than epistemological terms: It is not a form of knowledge,

but a way of being, of projecting ourselves into the world and toward our ends.

36 Using Ryle's term, one might say that the project is "systematically elusive."

37 On the issue of the blind spot in reflexive knowledge, cf. my paper "Kant and Sartre on Self-Knowledge," in *Man and World,* 19, no. 1 (1986): 73–93.

38 Cf. Merleau-Ponty, Preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception.* Cf. also T. Nagel "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" in *Mortal Questions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

39 On the idea that personal being is a product of theoretical activity, cf. R. Harre, *Personal Being* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).

40 As this is defended in the work of Kuhn and Feyerabend.

41 Cf. C. Taylor, "Responsibility for Self," and *Sources of the Self,* Part 1.

42 A notion developed in Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970).

43 Ibid., p. 37.

44 J. P. Sartre, *The Words,* tr. B. Frechtman (New York: Braziller, 1964) p. 238.

45 Ibid.

46 This is also Merleau-Ponty's criticism: To say that we are our fundamental project amounts to saying that our life is already made, and that its development is nothing but a repetition of the primordial choice. It is impossible "to name a single gesture which is absolutely new in regard to that way of being in the world which, from the very beginning, is myself. There is no difference between saying that our life is completely constructed and that it is completely given" (*Sense and Nonsense,* trans. by H. and P. Dreyfus [Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964], p. 21).

47 Cf. Tugendhat, *Self-Consciousness and Self-Determination,* p. 213.

48 J. P. Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason,* tr. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: New Left Books, 1976), hereafter abbreviated in text as *CDR.*

49 *The Family Idiot* reveals the importance of countenancing historical and contextual factors in discussions of moral psychology. Some philosophical analyses of agency, responsibility, and self-determination are unjustifiably abstract and unhistorical. By relying on simple analytical models of human experience (e.g., desire-belief matrices, first- and second-order desires), they neglect the phenomenology of moral life, and overlook its long-term temporal dimensions. While the method of analysis is neat, and puts the problems into manageable form, it is not always true to the context, and to the complexity of concrete moral-psychological experi-

ence. At its worst, the method tends to distort the very form of the
problem. The strength of Sartre's approach is that it takes a life as a
whole as the basic unit of empirical significance in moral psychology.

50 This is Merleau-Ponty's description of Sartre's view of consciousness.

51 Sartre, "Itinerary of a Thought," in *Between Existentialism and Marx-
ism*, pp. 34–5.

52 Cf. also T. Nagel, "Moral Luck," in *Mortal Questions*. Nagel remarks
that the area of genuine agency, and of legitimate moral judgment,
seems to shrink under this kind of questioning to an extensionless
point.

53 Sartre, *The Words*, p. 254.

54 J. P. Sartre, "On The Idiot of the Family," in *Life/Situations*, tr. P. Auster
and L. Davis (New York: Pantheon, 1977), p. 116.

55 Cf. also *CDR* pp. 329–30 for a discussion of the case of an individual
who wishes to transcend his "class being." However much intelligence,
work, or patience he displays, "he has simply realized his being – the
very thing he cannot change – in slightly different circumstances."

56 The example comes from D. Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of
Free Will Worth Wanting* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 84–5.

57 For criticisms of incompatibilism, see the articles by Schlick, Hobart,
and Foot in *Free Will and Determinism*, ed. B. Berofsky (New York:
Harper & Row, 1966).

58 J. S. Mill, *On the Logic of the Moral Sciences*, from *A System of Logic*,
Book VI (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), pp. 14–15.

59 Sartre's account of Flaubert's constitutional passivity bears out his
claim that "no determination is imposed upon an existent which he
does not surpass by his way of living it" (*IF I:* p. 653). During boyhood
and adolescence Flaubert assumes the passivity that he lived on an ele-
mentary psychosomatic level as an infant "in order to make it a more
developed behaviour and to assign it a new function – passive action
becomes a tactical, flexible defense against a danger better understood,
pure blind sentience becomes resentment. Preserved, overcome, tra-
versed by new and complex meanings, its sense cannot fail to change"
(*IF I:* p. 54).

60 F. Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (Moscow: Progress Publish-
ers, 1954), p. 72.

61 Cf. H. Frankfurt, "Identification and Wholeheartedness," in F.
Schoeman, ed., *Responsibility, Character and the Emotions* (New York:
Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 27–45.