

**Prompt:** *Sartre is a very strong proponent of strong determinism, that is, he does not merit any sort of determinism at all when considering human action. I present the case for a minimal determinism that involves restriction to choices between limited options, as determined by both the mental and physical worlds.*

We do not live our lives in despair, constantly worrying about what may happen unexpectedly. For many people, life does seem like something that we control handedly. Life seems to be something we can direct, or at least influence. Supposing there are circumstances beyond our control, they rarely seem to present us a problem; we live contently believing that we are at least partly responsible for our fates.

Seldom do we question the truth in this, of whether or not we have some say in the direction of our lives.

Some would argue this is not so. Some of these people would happen to look at a deity or hard sciences to lead us to a cogent determined purpose. The fact remains that whether or not purpose lies in causality, a chain of events full of causes and effects may be explained perfectly if we had the knowledge.

Determinists would argue that our free will is simply an illusion and we are deluding ourselves if we believe we have control. Sartre would argue that even the most seemingly random of occurrences are in fact entirely our fault; no matter what we do, who we talk to, and regardless of the circumstances, everything happens because it is our will because in some way or another our choices have allowed the event to happen. Each side of the debate has its merits and each side its flaws. As such, it becomes particularly difficult to choose between one and the other. I think that such a choice is not necessary.

Though the choices seem at first to mark a dichotomy, they are in fact quite compatible with the truth of the matter lying somewhere in between. We *do* have choice; however, this choice is only between limited options, as determined by both the mental and physical worlds.

It seems essential to define the two extremes. The first of these, determinism, is the belief that everything has a pre-noted physical existence and that interactions of physical elements are a set of known processes. Typically, this isn't an explanation of a religious merit, rather, it is in terms of science and of causality. According to determinists, the universe follows those rules that we observe and record in our sciences. The motions of bodies are given purely in terms of physics, with mathematical equations used to predict or explain these physical principals. What composes these bodies and how those basic elements interact is the domain of chemistry. Even the behavior of animals comes down to the satisfaction of certain basic drives, as biology tells us. According to this biology, plant and animal behavior are explained in

simplest terms as the pursuit of life and procreation. Scientifically, there is little mystery why one animal kills another; it is in the name of self-preservation and for the preservation of progeny. According to scientific explanation, almost any behavior becomes seemingly explainable. Those processes that are not scientifically explained (such as quantum mechanics) are currently being “researched” in order to discover the “laws” behind them. This belief is quite hard to argue against, particularly when talking about a purely physical world. So long as bodies are free from the influence of intelligence, these rules will apply and apply consistently. Determinists seem to be able to take this whole ideology one step further by saying that even with “intelligence,” everything must follow physical rules and laws. It does not matter that we think we do not have the ability to make choices nor does it matter that we think at all. There is no room inside a scientific universe for free will because it causes a sort of chaos that can’t be resolved within the physical realm. Free will cannot and must not exist. More so, the determinist argues that while we may have certain mental states, they are entirely influenced by the physical world but cannot influence the physical world themselves. The primary flaw is that the determinist principle goes against our every perception. I find myself sitting at a desk, typing out my thoughts into a computing device that expresses them as a string of symbols each with inherent values. Had my thoughts been elsewhere, it seems unlikely that I would still create this same string of alphanumeric characters. My thoughts seem to directly influence what physically ends up on this paper. On the same token, my limbs do not move involuntarily. At least they do not seem to move independent of my desires, they move where I tell them to, when I tell them to under perfectly normal circumstances. My every perception tells me that I can influence the physical world around me, even in a world that is ruled by the laws of physics. Another flaw inherent to the view is the bleak world it presents to us. According to the determinist, we are nothing but slaves, passive observers in a world that we are doomed to have no influence over. These examples seem to present a world quite different from that of the determinist view. Many people would agree that this is an undesirable conclusion and that every effort should be made to find a view in which a slightly more hopeful world is presented.

This brings us to the other extreme, the belief of Sartre that we are actually entirely free. In order to understand Sartre’s belief, it is first necessary to understand the indeterminist view. What this view tells us is that the laws of science simply are not enough to explain away the world. While physics and chemistry

may seem to tell us all we need to know, there is another element out there. Human behavior, they would say, is the result of human volition. Any human choice cannot be explained fully in terms of cause and effect. In fact, it is simply an unfair question to ask why desire occurs. For lack of any better explanation, they simply are, and come to be in an almost random manner. I think this is where the first problem with indeterminism arises. By stating that all of our actions are caused by these random occurrences, free will does not actually seem to enter the equation. Instead of being slaves to rules and order as with determinism, *we now find ourselves slaves to chance*. In this sense, determinism and indeterminism both seem to lead to the same dead end, the conclusion since we do not have any true empirical control. The indeterminist then posits that the external world is not actually independent of human perception. Instead, the universe and everything in it, exists as a direct consequence of human existence, and is forever dependent upon it. This view serves two essential purposes. First, it devaluates the deterministic argument that the universe follows its own set of rules and laws. If the universe is in a way created by man, then that same universe must follow laws created by man as well. The first premise of the determinist argument comes apart if this view is accepted. The second, and perhaps more important of the purposes, is to combat skepticism. Skeptical arguments rest on the fact that there is an objective world around us and the only way we know of it is through our perceptions. Their beliefs require a methodology based on an assumption of doubt with the aim of acquiring approximate or relative certainty. If it turns out this world is not actually objective in nature and is in fact subjective, dependent on humanity to create and interpret it, skepticism falls apart because they will have to doubt everything, even their own existence (take that Descartes). Thus, while indeterminism might not be the most intuitive view, if its premises are held to be true, it is a powerful tool.

Sartre's belief is not simply that we are at times free, in that we can make our own choices; it is his belief that we are entirely free in every sense of the word. We are free to think what we want, believe what we want, do absolutely anything that falls within our intuitive whim. To Sartre, there are no constraints whatsoever on our freedom, or at least none of any significance. "I am condemned to be free," he states. "This means that no limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself or, if you prefer, that we are

not free to cease being free.”<sup>1</sup> Sartre tries to explain these difficulties, claiming that obstacles only present themselves through our own choices. To illustrate this, he speaks of a crag jutting out of a landscape.

*A particular crag, which manifests a profound resistance if I wish to displace it, will be on the contrary a valuable aid. In itself... it is neutral; that is, it waits to be illuminated by an end in order to manifest itself as adverse or helpful.*<sup>2</sup>

This particular allegory seems to scream of the importance of how we can turn any sort of empirical obstacle into a preliminary choice that would help us form subsequent choices. For instance, if our goal was not to move the mountain but instead to find a better view of the countryside, then the crag is no longer an obstacle. Instead, it is now a helpful tool, as it can be climbed in order to obtain a far more grand view. Another analogy, along the same lines, might go as follows. Imagine someone locked in a room, with walls on all sides and no way out. If this person desired to leave the room, the walls would certainly present an obstacle. On the other hand, if his desired end were not to leave but instead simply to hang a portrait of himself, the wall would be a great tool. The portrait could then be hung on the wall, and his end would be reached. The wall itself would not be an obstacle unless his desired end lay outside of the walls. Such examples, while somewhat illuminating in regards to human nature, do little to prove Sartre’s point. While we can conceive of circumstances where the crag or the walls would not be obstacles, we can just as easily conceive of circumstances wherein they would. Both examples seem to show that the physical world does in fact limit us. We may not desire to move the mountain or pass through the wall, but even if we did, we could not do so. This is a stark contrast to Sartre’s intended point.

There is a factor that those on both Sartre and determinists seem to ignore, the nature of the connection between the physical world and the psychical one: the relationship between the physical and the mental. This is a connection that is very hard to pin down exactly, but is nonetheless of the greatest importance to any discussion of free will. It seems obvious that mental phenomenon and physical phenomenon cannot be measured in the same way. Thoughts, beliefs and ideas do not have any apparent mass, any specific charge or amount of energy in the sense that physical phenomenon do. At first, it seems that the mental and the physical must exist on entirely different planes. If this were true, determinism would

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<sup>1</sup> Being and Nothingness (1943).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

make a lot of sense. With the mental and the physical separated, it would be near impossible for any mental process to affect the “real” world. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Our thoughts and beliefs are linked to the physical world in a very real sense. Our consciousness does not leave our body at will, it does not float freely from one object to the next, giving them the appearance of intelligence. Instead, it stays in place, always attached to our corporeal form. Anything that happens to the physical form seems to affect the mental state as well. If the body is cut, the mind will experience the sensation of pain. The reverse of this process also seems to occur with relative frequency. Cases of people putting “mind over matter”, fighting off illness or injury through pure determination, are often in the news as human-interest stories. By focusing their mental processes on a task, people seem able to defy conventional logic and even science, and accomplish tasks beyond what we would normally consider possible. Even if these acts can be explained through medical terms (i.e. the body began producing excess amounts of certain chemicals), the trigger to that medical occurrence was the person’s will. Through sheer mental force, they altered their body’s natural tendencies in order to better reach their goals. Upon further consideration, it becomes apparent that while the physical and mental worlds seem separate from each other, each possesses the ability to affect the other. The question then is how this is related to free will. Free will manifests itself in the mental world and applies itself to the physical. Though this statement may seem to fall into the same trap as soft determinism in that it appears to take a list of all possible causes and arbitrarily pick one as “free”, there is a subtle difference. In this case, all other causes on the list are of a physical nature. No action that is rooted purely in the physical world can be considered free. It is subject to rules and laws that determine predictable patterns. Not only do we describe physical objects as following these rules, we expect them to. Thus, actions of a purely physical nature, actions unaffected by intelligent beings, are determined and unfree. Actions within the mental plane, determined by the choices, thoughts, desires and beliefs of intelligent beings, are indeterminate and free. It is when these mental actions exert themselves on the physical world that free will is exercised.

The idea that the physical world is constrained by the laws of science is not a new one, nor is it particularly controversial. Nearly everyone will agree that for all practical purposes, science seems to be a valid representation of what goes on in the physical universe or else we wouldn’t have to bother with studying physics, chemistry or biology at all. These hard sciences are a strict guide for what will occur in

the universe, and any physical act not explainable by our current science is only so because of a lack of knowledge on our part. Most, if not all, arguments against this fact rely on skepticism, and as such extend beyond the scope of my argument. For simplicity's sake, these skeptical arguments will be ignored, as they contribute nothing particularly valuable to the discussion, and should be dealt with as an entirely separate issue.

Another issue to discuss is the concept of our mental world being constrained by our will. This would seem a troublesome idea, especially for someone like Sartre. There seem to be countless instances where the mind wanders somewhere we do not want it to, experiences emotions we find undesirable, and generally causes us problems that seem independent of our free will. Such instances include nightmares, perhaps the occasional bad feeling when walking down a dark alley or even seeing an unfriendly face walking towards us at night. This is simply an illusion. We *do* have control over all of the purely mental aspects of our mind. It is only when the physical world interferes that we find limitations to this control.

Perhaps the most obvious of these physical limits is that of brain damage. This is something that Sartre doesn't specifically address, but I feel it important to siphon it out of the background. It has been shown in countless instances that damage to particular sections of the brain will produce certain results. These results can include an inability to form memories, a slower learning process, even the complete dissipation of any outward signs of intelligence (i.e. a coma). All of these examples seem to indicate that the brain is home to the link between mental and physical worlds. When this link is damaged through damage to the brain itself, being either a chemical imbalance, physical damage or a gushing wound, our mental faculties are impaired. It is important to realize that in this case, the limitation on the mind is the result of a purely physical cause. Mental illness and brain damage, then, cannot be used to disprove purely mental freedom, as they are physical in nature. I think Sartre's big stink with this statement would be that he may not consider these "damaged" persons as people at all. He would more than likely cast these physical beings aside as nothing more than artifacts of choice and chance of the person that existed within the particular physical confines. I don't think Sartre would concede anything that I have said because He wouldn't want to admit to such people existing in damaged states. I find this worrisome because it is almost as if he would be ready and willing to dissolve the normal convention of how we see human development (physical and cognitive) and say that the only person that exists is one that we may be able to characterize based on

free will criteria. I don't know if I would call this stance naïve or haphazard. I think that the very notion that Sartre saying that determinism is wrong and that we are imbued with free will is a poor assumption to start with. It's as if he has ignored any sort of physicality that drives the beingness of human existence. From a hard scientific point of view, it seems that one side is ignoring the other and causing the scientists to scoff at Sartre's ideas. Such an impasse seems to be counterproductive to Sartre's points.

One might then argue about emotions, arguing that who we love and when we feel sadness or rage are matters beyond our control. In order to refute this, we must look at the origin of emotions, and in doing so one thing becomes clear: our emotions are just another aspect of our mental interpretations of the physical world. There is nothing inherently sad about death. On its own, as a purely physical occurrence, death is just one part of a cycle. Creatures and people are dying every second. It is not until we assign a value to death that there is any emotional significance to it. Take for example a widow attending her husband's funeral. Though she cries, it is not the death of her husband specifically that she is crying about. She cries because she came to define her husband as a positive aspect of her life. Her time with him was pleasant, and she has now come to the realization that there will be no more of these pleasant times. She looks at the world ahead as one that is less good than the one before it, and so she becomes sad. In another case, where someone has been suffering from a debilitating disease for years, death may come as a relief to family members. Instead of thinking of lost potential for future happiness, these people would see death as a merciful end to years of anguish. In fact, they might even be happy to see the person die. No situation on its own is enough to determine the emotional content of it. This emotion is instead a direct result of our beliefs, of our memories, of our consciousness, of all aspects of our minds. With enough effort one could change this mental context, and so change the emotion itself.

What then can be made of our primal desires? Hunger, thirst, fatigue, lust: surely these are beyond our control. After all, if we go too long without sleep, we can hardly resist passing out. As well, people who have gone too long without eating sometimes report losing control of them. These primal desires within the mind seem to be so strong that there is sometimes no way have resisted them. It is key to remember here that biology is one of the hard sciences. This implies that any innate biological drives such as hunger or the desire to reproduce begin as physical in nature. It is only our interpretation of these drives that belong to the mental plane; their actual existence is rooted in the physical. Thus, when the physical

urge to eat becomes so strong that it overpowers the mind, this is not a mental limit on mental phenomenon, it is the physical world affecting the mind. Again, actions entirely on the mental plane are entirely free. Once they begin to tie in with the physical world, with physical desires or laws, limits begin to be placed on this freedom.

As Sartre himself says, without limitation there can be no freedom. “There can be a free for-itself only as engaged in a resisting world. Outside of this engagement the notions of freedom, of determinism, of necessity lose all meaning.” These limitations, the resistance brought about by both the physical and mental worlds, do not imply we have no freedom. It implies only that we have a limited number of choices. In a given situation, I do not have the option of making myself invisible to the human eye. I do not have the option to become immaterial, and float away from danger. The reality of the physical world makes this impossible. However, I can choose what I think, I can choose how I interpret the situation, and I can choose how that interpretation will affect my actions. Then, these choices will determine how I interact within the rules of the physical world. I am not a slave by nature; I am not purely a subject to a set of rigid laws that limit my options to a single path. Instead, I find myself within a system that presents me with an incredible amount of paths, each slightly different from the rest, each with slightly different consequences than the others. Far from a slave, I am free to choose from these paths. Though my choices are limited by the realities of both the physical and mental worlds, they still do exist. In addition, as such, I am free to interact as I choose within the laws of the world around me. While this may pale in comparison to the universal empirical freedom promised by Sartre, it is enough to leave some hope, even just a glimmer, of being the master of one’s own destiny with a discrete set of criteria to guide us.