

## §9 Freedom as Thing, Force, and Gaze

One will ask whether we are still free when we are free to the point that Being is what is free in us, before us, and ultimately for us. This very question could not help posing itself to Heidegger, who finally answered—during the period in which he still thematized freedom, although this was a decisive step toward the abandonment of the theme—that freedom considered as the “root” of being in no way agreed with freedom represented as the property of man:

But if *ek-sistent Da-sein*, which lets beings be, sets man free for his “freedom” by first offering to his choice something possible (a being) and by imposing on him something necessary (a being), human caprice does not then have freedom at its disposal. Man does not “possess” freedom as a property. At best the converse holds: freedom, *ek-sistent, dispositive Da-sein*, possesses man. . . .<sup>1</sup>

In what sense, however, is man “possessed” by freedom? Sartre interpreted this thought in his celebrated formulation: “We are condemned to freedom.”<sup>2</sup> Now this is certainly not the sense in which freedom should be understood, unless we confuse a thinking of the existence of being with an “existentialism.” For Sartre, this “condemnation” means that my freedom, “which is the foundation,” intervenes in order to found—which means, according to Sartre, to engage in a “project” of existence—in a situation of “determinism” by virtue of which I am not free:

Thus my freedom is condemnation because I am not free to be or not to be ill and illness comes from without: it is not from myself, it has nothing to do with me and is not my fault. But since I am free, I am constrained by my freedom to make it mine, to make it *my* horizon, *my* view, *my* morality, etc. I am perpetually condemned to will what I have not willed, no longer to will what I have willed, to construct myself in the unity of a life in the presence of destructions externally inflicted on me. . . . I am obliged to assume this determinism in order to place the ends of my freedom beyond it, to make of this determinism one more *engagement*.

Thus the condemnation to freedom is itself the consequence of a condemnation to necessity. Because I cannot avoid illness, I also cannot, in order to be a human being, whose essence lies not in an object but in a project, exempt myself from the necessity of making this accident the means, opportunity, and stepping-stone of a new overstepping of my accidental and accident-prone being in the project of “the unity of a life.” I must “assume” my nonfreedom; more exactly, I must assume one of the “aspects of the situation,” namely, the “passivity” surrounded by “the totality of the world,” by means of the other aspect, which is the freedom to make a life project out of every condition.

This analysis fundamentally refers to a lack as well as to an excess in the apprehension of existence. It refers to a lack insofar as the freedom that is posited here as the taking charge of what it cannot choose or decide is itself definitively considered a power (or perhaps only an obligation . . . ) commanded by its own deficiency, which corresponds to a deficiency in the essence of human beings: freedom “is the foundation” in human beings who “lack . . . being their own foundation.” Freedom here is not “the foundation of foundation,” as we have analyzed it, but is the foundation in default of foundation. It is also not experience as the experience of the limit at which experience itself does not belong to itself or return to itself—which is what gives it its freedom—but it is the proof that there is something other than freedom, a default of the autonomy and autarchy of a freedom that remains in itself a full power of self-determination. It is no longer a question of the foreignness of freedom to itself, but of

a hindrance or constraint that limits it from the exterior, through "determinism." Thus freedom finds itself again endowed with an essence (the project) and with an aseity (the decision to assume itself) which operates, within its own limits, as a foundation whose foundation (which is apparently to be found in subjectivity) we would not question. And we doubtless understand the distracted desire that compelled Sartre to restore a consistency to a traditional power of *homo metaphysicus*, who had been made so anemic by the modern awareness of the world's implacable "investment." But this simply amounts to an attempt to provide a compromise solution for the most classical freedom of subjectivity in a space henceforth conceived and lived as foreign and hostile to this subjectivity (whereas this space is precisely the deployment of this subjectivity, as could be shown, for example, by a detailed analysis of the idea of "illness" that governs the text's example). In this sense, the Sartrean freedom that "assumes" objectivity without any of the means of objectivity is desperately in need of itself.

As for excess, the case is of course symmetrical. What is at stake for me, as I act on my "condemnation" to freedom by assuming the situation and overstepping it, is that "the world must appear to me as issuing in its being from a freedom which is my freedom." The goal and obligation is nothing less than to find a way of relating an absolute subjectivity to the very order of the world whose reality denies the absoluteness of subjectivity. (Furthermore, it is perhaps only a question of acting as if "the world must appear to me as . . ."; at the limit, the self-deception of freedom is clearly what is being claimed). If this goal has any meaning (and for Sartre it is "meaning" itself), it would have to be based, as in Hegel, on the presupposition of an infinite Spirit—which, however, could not be admitted here. If the subject is finite, the goal has no meaning. Sartre will of course be able to say: "Each person must realize the goal, and it must still remain to be realized afterwards. The *finite* pursuit of each person in the infinite pursuit of humanity." The *finite* and the *infinite* are juxtaposed here in such a way that no ontological community could be found for them, except in a mode of foreclosure: Sartre's "finite" is a *pure and simple hindrance* to being infinite (compensating

for this anguish by vaguely projecting an infinite humanity—which is only a bad infinity. . . ), and his "infinite" is a *pure and simple avoidance* of the condition of the finite.

One could not accomplish with greater consciousness, with a tenacity made more striking by its insistence, the unhappiness of consciousness that Hegel recognized in order to sublimate it into the self-knowledge of actualization. Deprived of this sublation (or only proposing it in the mode of a deliberate "as if"), Sartrean freedom—in some ways the last "philosophical freedom," already prepared to cede its ground to the juridical defense of freedoms—is the final name of this unhappiness of consciousness: condemned to being, in the infinite form of the project (which would ultimately be the will's unhappiness), the infinite consciousness of the finite and the finite consciousness of the infinite.

Sartre's man is not "possessed" by freedom: he is forced by it into the "free" knowledge of his infinite deprivation of freedom. But here again, definitively, freedom has been measured against the necessity of causality: the freedom of the Sartrean "project" is the will to be the cause of that for which causes are lacking or contrary in given reality. The project is a wishful causality launched in defiance of experienced causality: the heroism of despair. (This has marked up until now, we should not forget, a large collection of discourses, not always directly existentialist, on freedom conceived of as the assumption, the overstepping, or in some sense the redemption, of harsh necessity.)

As long as the concept of freedom remains caught in the space of causality—and of will as causality through representation—it does not permit us to think of anything other than a spontaneous causality whose reality will always remain at least doubtful (measured by the measuring instruments of causality as such, which means according to the anthropology of the "human sciences") and whose secret will be kept, in every case, in the principle of causality itself. Now, the principle of causality, in Kantian terms,<sup>3</sup> is that of the permanence of substance, to which the concepts of necessary force and action lead back in order for the problem of change in phenomena to be considered. This principle is formulated in the fol-



lowing way: "all change (succession) of appearances is merely alteration. Coming into being and passing away of substance are not alterations of it, since the concept of alteration presupposes one and the same subject as existing with two opposite determinations and therefore as abiding."<sup>4</sup> Thus the only possible logic of freedom as causality would require that I be the cause of my birth and death. I can certainly be this cause, if not entirely explicitly for Kant, then at least according to a coherent explication of his thinking, to the extent that I can be, as an intelligible being and outside of the succession of time, the subject of a specific causality that is itself of the order of the intelligible, that is, "free." But this new causality must be able to be considered as reunited with sensible or natural causality. To think the permanence of the substance of the world united with the spontaneity of a subject of action is to think the unconditioned causality of the totality (as it is represented in the Idea by the subject of the imperative in view of the realization of a moral nature). However, the idea of the unconditioned causality of totality is nothing other than the idea of being itself. Thus "the possibility of a unification of two quite different kinds of causality. . . lies in the supersensible substrate of nature, of which we can determine nothing positively, except that it is the being (*das Wesen*) in itself of which we merely know the phenomenon."<sup>5</sup> But to attribute to being (or to essence, which is here precisely the same thing), considered as cause, the character of the unconditioned and spontaneous is to withdraw this being as such from beings in their totality, for whom alone the category of causality has validity. Furthermore, it is to withdraw causality from itself or into itself. (This is why Kant's logic could lead one to claim that freedom *is* and is only causality itself, or that freedom is its fundamental *efficacy* whose means remain hidden in the law of phenomenal succession. This could also lead one to wonder whether it is schematism—and specifically the first schema, the "I generate time"—that opens successivity, whose "hidden art" would finally harbor the secret of freedom. . . . But could this secret be reduced to anything that is not also secret? . . . Unless the thinking of freedom must be that of something like *the manifest fact of a secret*. . . .)

The idea of a "unification of two heterogeneous causalities" can only signify a *heterogenesis* of causality: a *cause* without causality, or a substance without permanence. But the *cause* without causality, that is to say exempted as much from determination *by* another cause as from the determination *to* produce an effect, is the *thing* itself, the thing *in itself*. The thing [*chose*] of the phenomenon is not its cause [*cause*] (even if, as everyone knows, it is the same word): it is its existence. *Existence is the withdrawal of being as cause and as permanent substrate*, or, further, it is *the withdrawal of the cause in the thing*. The fact of the existence of the thing (its *Setzung*) makes all the successive changes of its essence exist at the same time, but this fact, in conformity with the Kantian principle, has nothing to do with its changes as such. The idea of "causality by freedom" represents nothing other than this *Setzung*, or the *birth* (and death) of the thing, except that its enunciation forgets that the cause in question—freedom—is precisely the thing without causality. In this sense, one would be justified in saying that metaphysics is exactly the forgetting of freedom (resulting in Sartre), and that this forgetting is produced at the precise moment that it *carries over the determination of the essence of causality onto the pure determination of the existence of freedom*, whereas existence exists only as the withdrawal of essence and consequently the *thing* exists only as the withdrawal of cause.

It is therefore not "being free" in the metaphysical sense of this concept as much as it is being free where the thing, at the moment it is valued as the very "cause," withdraws from all causality, and consequently, so it seems, from every force and action necessary for the production of the effectivity expected of a free act. This is not actually "being free" in the sense of being able to *cause* "freely," but it is existence's being-free. In this sense, the existent is "possessed" by freedom: it is "possessed" by it not in the privative mode of the necessity of mitigating (more or less imaginarily) its inability to posit itself and think itself as unconditioned causality, but in the affirmative mode in which freedom measures itself precisely against the fact that its Idea (unconditioned causality) is finally the Idea (which is precisely no longer an Idea, but a fact) of the thing without causality. This is the Idea of existence, in which and as

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which the "Idea" is immediately given as *fact* and this fact is given as *experience*.<sup>6</sup>

Yet what is given in this way as fact and experience is thereby also given, without changing ontological registers, as force and as action. Being free is not given as a "property" that it would be possible to make use of *on condition* of disposing elsewhere of the forces necessary for this usage, which also supposes that when all forces are lacking for action (and usually almost all are lacking in this regard . . .) freedom withdraws into the interiority from which it never ceases to shine, superb and powerless, until a last fatal force comes to extinguish its mocking flame.

On the contrary, even though it is effectively powerless, freedom is given as force and as action. The reality of the freedom of him who finds himself deprived of the power to act is not a "pure interior disposition," it is not a simple protestation of the spirit against the chaining up of the body. It is, it should be said, *the very existence of this body*. The existence of a body is a free force which does not disappear even when the body is destroyed and which does not disappear as such except when the relation of this existence to an other and destructive existence is itself destroyed as a relation of existences, becoming a relation of essences in a causality: such is the difference of relation between the murderer and his victim, and the difference of nonrelation between the exterminator and his mass grave. This force is neither of the "spirit" nor of the "body"; it is existence itself, impossible to confuse with a subjectivity (since it can be deprived of consciousness and will) or with an objectivity (since it can be deprived of power).

Freedom as the *force of the thing* as such, or as the force of the act of existing, does not designate a force opposed to or combined with other forces of nature.<sup>7</sup> Rather, it designates that from which there can rise relations of force as such, between human beings and nature and between human beings among themselves. It is the force of force in general, or the very resistance of the thing's existence—its resistance to being absorbed into immanent being or into the succession of changes. Accordingly, it is a transcendental force, but one that is a material actuality. Because *existence* as such has its be-

Nature

It is the point of contact with the idea of the spirit.

ing (or its thing) in the act, or if we like, in the praxis of existing, it is impossible not to grant it the actual character of a force, the thought of which implies the thought of a transcendental materiality, or if we prefer, an ontological materiality: the withdrawal of being as a material *Setzung* of singularity, and the difference of singularities as a difference of forces. Prior to every determination of matter, this materiality of existence, which sets down the fact of freedom, is no less endowed with the material properties of exteriority and resistance.<sup>8</sup>

Being free as being "possessed" by freedom is being free with the actuality of a materiality irreducible to any "pure spirituality" of freedom (and yet, "spirit" is this material difference in which the existent comes to expose itself as such). Though we cannot represent this materiality without making it drift into the order of forces both represented and linked in causality, and though, because of this fact, we cannot avoid falling back into an (optimistic or pessimistic) appreciation of the possibilities of action available to freedom, which, because of this fact, is reduced to a causal property of "spirit" (but who would dare simply to appreciate in this way the free force of the cadaver before its murderer?), this does not testify against the ontological status of the force of freedom. This indicates, in the very resistance to the concept, the impenetrability without which freedom would not be freedom. (One should not forget that what resists in this way is found constantly lodged at the heart of causality itself, as the efficacy of its successivity. It is not in the "spirit" alone that the force of freedom resides and resists, but it is in the existence of every *thing* as such. One could say: "we" are the freedom of every thing.)

Here thinking appears to be most clearly removed from both comprehension and incomprehension:<sup>9</sup> thinking does not comprehend freedom's force, but also does not regard it as incomprehensible—actually, it is colliding, as thinking, with the hard matter of freedom itself, this foreign body which is its own and by virtue of which alone it can be what it is: thinking. It is first in itself, and as its own/alien material intensity, that thinking touches the impenetrable resistance of freedom (and it touches it, more precisely, as the resis-

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tance of *language*, as the resistance of the *singularity* of thinkers and thoughts, but also as this other resistance, again singular, of the *body* that thinks, with muscles tensed, strong flashes in the mind, and the silent density of a flesh that delivers and withdraws at will what we call "thoughts" . . . ).

So then, freedom is far from being able to be only "a thought" and it is also not a freedom "in thinking." It corresponds instead to the following: the fact that the existent thinks does not constitute one property among others in the existent, but sets up rather the very structure of its existence, because in thought—or as thought—it is removed from the immanence of being. This absolutely does not mean that the existent exists only in the dimension of "pure thought": there is precisely no "pure thought" if thinking is existence according to the transcendence that delivers it to the world and to the finitude of shared being. Rather, this means that the *life of the existent is identically its thought* (and for this reason, moreover, a philosophy of "life" does not suit it any more than does a philosophy of "spirit"). Before or beyond every determinate thought, in particular every deduction of its "freedom" or "nonfreedom," as well as every intuition of one or the other of these, *thinking is the act for which its essence of act (its force, and therefore the "substance" that should be endowed with this force) is no more present in immanence than it is conceived in representation. Thinking is the act of an in-actuality:* this is why it cannot appear to itself in order to master itself, in the mode of a subjectivity, but is for itself—as that which it thinks and as that which thinks it, always other than itself and always initial—the experience of the impenetrable force of its freedom.

This force can be considerable or minute in its calculable effects depending on the linking of causes (assuming we can calculate the effects of thinking and of freedom), but is in itself, as *thing* and not as cause, always the same. It always has the same intensity, which is not a relative but an absolute intensity. This is the absolute intensity that through and through *ex-tends* the play of differences by which we exist in the relation of singularities. Freedom is the absolute tension of the relation, this ontologically material tension whose impenetrability is the absolute price of existence ("dig-

How different to Sartre?

nity," in the Kantian lexicon, which means what is no longer a "value"). This tension is visible as soon as two gazes cross (it is not even certain that this has to be limited to human gazes, or that it must exclude what in our gaze looks at itself or is observed by the "inert" objects of the world): it is materially visible, or more than visible, "tangible," as the very invisibility of that which, in the gaze, gazes—and which is not a thought, nor a *face*, but the singular in-actuality of this very act of the gaze, of this intense opening of an existence-in-the-world (well prior to any perspective-taking by a subject). This withdrawal of presence which lets and lets itself come to presence, this incandescence of nothingness in which every cause withdraws into the thing (here: there is something), this can only be freedom [*la liberté*], or perhaps it would be better to say: this can only be freedom [*liberté*]. This freedom "possesses" us in the same way that the gaze possesses: by delivering to presence. But it has no relation of any kind to a causality. Being as cause arises from several possible kinds of theoretical vision. Being as thing is offered by the force of freedom's gaze. It is always freedom that gazes, perhaps from the endless depth of the "starry sky," but also in a look exchanged by chance, or from the depths of a prison, or even into the eyes of someone who has just died. And if it is always freedom that gazes, it is undoubtedly also always the same gaze.

to people  
to particular  
gazes.  
to things.