

Against Determinism

In [Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre](#), Simone de Beauvoir published a long discussion she had with her companion—the world-renowned, radical-left philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre—in the last years of his life. Though the two of them believed many things I find unpalatable, this phrase served me for some time as an email signature:

Simone de Beauvoir: Broadly speaking, how would you define...what you call Evil?

Jean-Paul Sartre: Evil is that which is harmful to human freedom, that which holds men out as not being free and which, for example, creates the determinism of the sociologists...

It's one of the biggest of the big questions: Are we free to act, or do things beyond our wills limit or determine our actions?

A trivial view of the question can be found in much of academic thinking today—and elsewhere too. There, the answer given is that people at the top of social hierarchies are free while those below them in those hierarchies are mercilessly compelled and unfree. “Structures” put in place by the powerful keep those lower in the social hierarchies powerless. The powerless are so impervious to struggle and individual effort that they can never escape their bondage. At least, not until the magical moment of the revolution.

Of course, while this view may not be accurate, social forces do inform the acts of individuals. We are sometimes driven down certain behavioral paths, or at least greatly encouraged to go down them, by things that are external to us. Just as physical environments set conditions on the freedom of all living things, social environments can affect our actions.

As a social scientist, I have spent much time thinking about the relationship of individual freedom and social force. As a purely scientific matter, the question of the influence of each of these forces is incredibly complex. And no position that ignores the influence of either freedom or structure is intellectually sustainable.

But it is not ultimately the scientific question that guides my action in everyday life with respect to this relationship of freedom and determinism. It is the moral concern for the dignity of human beings. The profound importance of hope is what drives my life with other people and my way of talking with them about this topic.

What if the evidence clearly indicated that structures in American society were fully deterministic of people's lives?

What would we do with that knowledge of unfreedom in our everyday lives? How would it affect our interactions with others and our understanding of the possibilities of our lives and theirs?

What would we tell young people? What would parents tell their children?

Telling young people this deterministic worldview would deflate their spirits. It would mean telling them that what they do really matters very little or not at all. We would be saying to them that the trajectories of their lives are out of their control.

Telling young people that their efforts are in vain might well lead them to give up even trying to make positive changes in their lives. It would be teaching them to accustom themselves to being at the whim of forces over which they exercise little or no power. It would require participating in the diminution of an extraordinary aspect of human beings: *our deep belief in and love of the notion of our own freedom.*

In such a conversation with a young person, I know what I would say to them.

I would tell them everything I could to convince them to try. I would tell them to have hope, even if I believed based on the evidence that their efforts had a significant likelihood of turning out fruitless and their hope proving ultimately groundless.

I would tell them to fill their hearts and their souls with happiness and the spirit of work and endeavor and effort. I would tell them they should never give up and never give in and always strive upward, upward, upward, no matter what faced them.

No matter what.

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