

# Judd Marcello

## The Fear of Unfettered Freedom

It is true, if men attempt the discussion of questions which lie entirely beyond the reach of human capacity, such as those concerning the origin of worlds, or the economy of the intellectual system or region of spirits, they may long beat the air in their fruitless contests, and never arrive at any determinate conclusion. *David Hume*

For all that man has opined on freedom, he quite possibly will never be free. While freedom does exist, it does so in a state of absolute perfection; true freedom is an ideal. At the moment of birth, as the child leaves the womb and the umbilical cord is cut, the ideal exists and existence is *free*. This moment, however, is fleeting. Freedom immediately collides with conditioning and begins its attrition; true freedom ends and man spends the rest of life fearing freedom or aspiring to recapture it.

For centuries, man has confronted and disputed the notion of freedom. Philosophers, magistrates, historians, scholars and the common man have struggled to accept, to manipulate or to confine freedom within definable terms. Not one, however, has been able to do so in a unifying conceptualisation. Mankind is evolving in a dispersible manner and the dividing line between freedom and what refutes it widens. As it has for centuries, this division will continue to widen. This essay will not attempt to bring resolve to this running dispute, rather, to argue that man exists only in an *unnatural* or a *personal* state of freedom which is determined by the extent to which his freedom transcends learned fear.

In support of this argument, man's brief flirtation with his natural freedom and its subsequent vanquishing in the conditioned collective unconscious will be outlined. Therein both freedom and fear will be discussed in terms of their relationship to conditioning (or *determinism*). The introduction of the *awareness-abolish* model will be presented as well. The works of B.F. Skinner and Jean-Paul Sartre will be called upon throughout in regards to their views on deterministic behaviour.

Sigmund Freud recognised for his theory of the unconscious, states that the unconscious operates as a reservoir of repressed memories of traumatic experiences.<sup>i</sup> Other philosophers have also pondered the notion and existence of the unconscious: Kant's "things-in-themselves",<sup>iii</sup> or the transcendent Will of Schopenhauer<sup>iv</sup> and the Jungian Archetypes (residing in the unconscious) are but a few examples.<sup>v</sup> The

unconscious, in the context of this essay is assumed to exist and is contemplated with regard to learning. The unconscious is extremely significant during the learning phase (birth to approximately the age of three). During this initial stage of life, children are unaware that they are actively learning. These first few years of learning are critical because they coexist with collective conditioning. Throughout this early learning process, fundamental (collective) conditioned beliefs are identified, of which gender, race, country, religion and class are included. The identifications are a collective, conditioned understanding of what each represent. As infants we embrace these identifications though we cannot define nor understand their significance; the identifications are simply learned attitudes, values and behaviours that exist within our understood-social system.

Conditioning our children is inherited. Instinctively man will pass his learned and accepted conditioning to the next generation. This conditioning is evident when the “blues” are separated from the “pinks”. Consider the parents who learn the sex of their child before birth. While child is still in-utero, parents build a nest of all things blue or all things pink. The new baby boy’s room has freshly painted blue walls while baseballs, footballs, plastic tool-benches “blue” the room. The baby girl’s room is bathed in pink, with dolls, dresses, bonnets and plastic kitchen appliances awaiting her arrival. We are conditioned to place newborns into the accepted role of man or woman from the time of birth (*or before*) until the time of death. The boy will grow to be a provider, a man, an athlete, a leader of business. The girl will grow to be a mother, a homemaker, a nurturer. The conditioning experienced here is a continuous cycle of conditioned behaviour, norms and beliefs are passed down from generation to generation and is unlikely to cease. While this is innocent in nature, it is conditioning that supports the *system*. Conditioning is the reflection displayed when society holds a mirror up to itself.

If from the moment that the conditioned world comes into contact with man that he is conditioned, where does that leave choice? Is this the beginning and possibly the end of choice? Before these questions can be answered, there must be a further explanation of conditioning or for that matter, psychological determinism. Determinism is understood to be a doctrine that every state of affairs, including every human event, act, and decision is the inevitable consequence of an antecedent.<sup>vi</sup> Determinism is understood here in two distinct definitions: *natural determinism* & *unnatural determinism*.

For the sake of this argument, the aforementioned psychological determination is not a valid concept for this essay. *Psychological* is defined as: “of, relating to, or arising from the mind and influencing or intended to influence the mind”.<sup>vii</sup> While their views on human behaviour are polar opposites, both Skinner and Sartre would have no need for this psychological determinism based on their lack of belief in the “mind”.<sup>viii</sup> Determinism, as relating to behaviour, is a concept that they would both understand, but for completely different reasons. Unnatural determinism is a Skinnerian (operant) conditioning or *fear* and natural determinism is a transparent *freedom* as it pertains to Sartre’s existentialism. Henceforth, each classification of determinism will be represented in this manner (as fear and freedom respectively).

B.F. Skinner thrived on determinism because of the control it wielded, in that human behaviour is determined by cause and the conditioning imposed by the environment.<sup>ix</sup> For Skinner, there is no such thing as freedom. There is only conditioned causal behaviour under which man behaves according to the path laid out for him. Fear occurs and is the result of man confronting the conditioning, questioning it, challenging the notion that conditioning is *right* and in turn, fear is that which enables the conditioning. This is man, the social animal, reacting to his repressed natural state of determinism, his freedom. Because Skinner did not believe in freedom, fear reacting to conditioning was viewed as being *out of line*, where the individual would need to be *re-conditioned* until *corrected*. It is in *Walden Two*, Skinner lays the ground work for his modern utopia of a behaviourally conditioned human society.<sup>x</sup> Even Skinner (Burrus) questions the validity of this utopia in his novel and at this crossroad Skinner unravels. His fascist utopia, his theory of a conditioned society, conflicts with his belief that there is “no theory” associated with the study of behaviour.<sup>xi</sup>

While Skinner may have understood that conditioning is unavoidable, he underestimated or worse, ignored man’s existential nature. What role does man’s existential nature play in the existence of freedom and the manifestation of conditioning? Again, true unfettered freedom is realised for a few moments upon birth. Until the child is slotted into a gender role, it *is* freedom. At this moment there has been no introduction or intrusion of life’s/society’s conditionings. It is also this moment that freedom will be lost and never to be recovered. Is this the beginning and possible end of choice? Yes. Choice is repressed due to conditioning in the collective unconscious, only to lay dormant in wait until the *awareness* of conditioning occurs, if at all.

While conditioning generates the fear that represses the freedom, freedom cannot be ignored. Freedom is part of man’s genetic fibre. At a certain stage in life, man becomes aware of his conditioning and it is here that the inherent freedom in all of man surfaces. The timing of this awareness is irrelevant, as each individual is subject to his own level of “condition-ability”. This awareness presents man with a unique challenge and opportunity. Man, aware of his conditioning, attempts to transcend it. In attempting doing so, fear responds and a struggle ensues between conditioning and freedom. The heart of the conflict is man’s fear of abolishing his conditioning, rather than fear of accepting his freedom. Consequently man either responds conditionally, saying “no” to freedom or chooses to transcend the conditioning, thereby bypassing fear to accept the responsibility of choice. This is the first true choice man executes as an existential being.

This moment is man’s initial step in assuming responsibility for his existence and does not qualify as man reaching the proverbial *light at the end of the tunnel*. From this point onward, man cannot ignore his freedom, choice or corresponding responsibility. As Sartre rightly states, “Our freedom is a burden that confronts us...it carries with it a terrible responsibility”.<sup>xii</sup> Assuming total responsibility for existence is no easy task and

doing so would equate to man's achievement of *true unfettered freedom*, the ideal. This achievement would inherently mean that man had succeeded in abolishing all of the conditioning imbedded in the conditioned collective unconscious. As stated earlier, this is unattainable. Due to the intensity of life long conditioning, man is forever aware of his conditioning and cannot cope with the idea of becoming his true unfettered freedom. Man is thereby condemned to conditioning and subject to his "conditioning leash" he is unable to confront all of his fear. As a result of his individual choice capacity, man begins an ebb-and-flow process of awareness and confronting of conditioning/fear that never ceases. Contrarily, some men will never have the capacity to break through their fear. These men may become aware of their conditioning but will not overcome it; thereby condemned to conditioning.

In order to understand freedom, man has to understand fear. Fear, on the other hand, is not dependant on freedom. Fear feeds on itself. The more man is fearful, the less power he has over fear and the less power he uses to become free of fear. Unless man reaches the point of awareness at which he recognises fear (again, *levels of condition-ability*), he knows not freedom and only that of fear. Could this be a logical interpretation of what Sartre meant by "existence before essence"? Man, in order to understand his essence, his freedom, first had to know his conditioned existence, his fear.

The aforementioned ebb and flow process results in a *personal freedom*, which unlike natural freedom, is a conditioned state of freedom. While exercising his ability to choose, he freely does so, however, fear continues to be present and it restrains further or *complete* choice from materializing. Fear may diminish as a result of awareness coupled with man's existential nature, but it lives. This conditioned freedom is *personal freedom*. Sartre's existentialism has left man with the uncertain notion of "bad faith". Sartre's bad faith is most often rationalised as, "lying to one's self". While the premise seems like a plausible concept, it is virtually impossible to lie to ones self if you *know the truth*. What could be said is that man is conditioning himself. Man is not only influenced by the conditioning imposed on him, but he allows for self-conditioning. Man will use self-conditioning to shelter himself from the burden of responsibility that he knows, in certain situations, he is unable to accept. In this case he is aware of conditioning but it is of his own volition; the conditioning becomes a personal conditioning where man is creating, responding and allowing for his own conditioning. While man rails against his societal conditioning and attempts to abolish it, he seeks shelter from responsibility in his own self-conditioning. In a sense, man is using his existential nature to deny himself his existential existence.

That being said, the freedom that man would now possess is a personal freedom that he is regulating rather than allowing to occur naturally. If personal freedom is a type of freedom that is still subject to a level of self-conditioning and fear, personal freedom is in fact, bad faith. The relationship between bad faith and choice is contradictory. To act in bad faith is to understand that you are freeing yourself from societal conditioning but you are then abstaining from choice and allowing for self-conditioning to take its place.

The self-conditioned man is more destructive than the society-conditioned man in that he is in control and choosing to use that control against, rather than for, freedom.

Does the existence of bad faith leave the door open for a *good faith* as well? Is natural freedom good faith? The answer to both of these questions is no. While this may be a valid premise theoretically, the point is moot because no man will ever be able to achieve (*regain*) his natural freedom, he is left only to aspire to do so. The drive of the existential nature in man yearns for his natural freedom and will continually abolish his fears to assume more responsibility for his existence. His personal freedom is the vehicle in which he continues to strive towards his ideal state, where the level of self-conditioning is continually eroded, moving towards natural freedom. The smaller the gap between man and the ideal state, the less he is living in bad faith. How then is the individual so affected by conditioning that he cannot ignore it and cannot accept *any* level of choice, responsibility and freedom, interpreted? These individuals are acting without any “faith” whatsoever. Again, this is man, condemned to conditioning.

How and when does *awareness* occur? George Herbert Mead describes a point of “crisis”<sup>xiii</sup>— in which man realises that he exists “in relation” to the world around him; he is in accord with the world. This crisis creates awareness which creates the opportunity for man to exercise his right to freedom and to abolish fear. Mead draws on Sartre’s “existence before essence”, proclaiming that, “one must lose oneself in order to find oneself”.<sup>xiv</sup>—

The awareness event can also be understood, in relation to Mead’s idea of crisis, calling on the works of H.J. Eysenck and J.B. Rotter. Within Eysenck’s two personality traits, lies *anxiety*. Eysenck considers anxiety to play an important role in understanding an individual’s response to stressors in life.<sup>xv</sup>— Anxiety is for Eysenck the trait that is most associated with fear. It can be said that an extreme state of fear creates an extreme reaction of anxiety. Anxiety is the result of fear as it pulls away from the conditioned response. It is here that a choice can be made as to be conditioned or to choose freedom over the anxiety.

J.B. Rotter’s social theory of Locus of Control<sup>xvi</sup> measures the degree to which individuals are either externals or internals.— For the purpose of this essay, externals represent those individuals who are controlled by fear and internals are those individuals who choose freedom over fear. The internals are more apt to understand and to confront their awareness of anxiety and to break free of their conditioned state.

Awareness of conditioning is crucial in man understanding his conditioning. In order to abolish it, he needs to first be aware of it. Whether it is actually a “crisis” situation that is fuelled by anxiety and regulated through a locus of control is secondary to the fact that awareness must occur in order for man to confront the fears that obstruct his freedom.

In summary, unnatural freedom is man’s true freedom robbed at birth from the societal conditioning which manifests within the conditioned collective unconscious. Man reaches a point of awareness and subsequent personal freedom in which he recognises this societal conditioning when he confronts his fear and transcends it via his existential

nature (choice). In situations where man cannot accept his responsibility for freedom and choice, he will self-condition and deny his own existential existence; in doing so, man exists in bad faith. Man will continually struggle within the ebb-and-flow process of trying to regain his natural, unfettered freedom though he will never achieve this; it is tainted by the conditioning he experienced once entering this world.

The notion of man being able to self-condition implies that the conditioning man is subjected to in his infancy, roots deeper than previously understood. Is this conditioning so entrenched that it allows for man to become conditioned to condition himself and betray his existential nature? Man's life quest towards regaining his natural freedom will challenge him to become responsible for his existence in the now as it relates to his past experience and the implications of his future existence.

This self-conditioning could prove to be much more difficult for man to overcome than the societal condition he endures. Man, not able to understand the presence of a self-conditioning buried within his unconscious, cannot escape it and will never understand any concept of freedom. Conversely it would be the measure in which man fathoms the full power of choice he possesses and uses it to assume his natural freedom. To overcome his inherent fears and to choose to accept responsibility for his pursuit of unfettered freedom, man would then understand his existence as a social animal in relation to all humanity.

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MGSM871 1 Judd Marcello  
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