

Sarah Edelstein

Prof. Kiva Silver

Stevenson 80B

‘Til Death Do We Choose

An Analysis of Freedom Across Three Classic Texts

The idea of human will and freedom is central to the themes of many classic texts. Freedom of life, mind, religion, body—these are all considered when turning to the question all classic works cover: how is it that one should live? *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Hebrew Bible, and Jean-Paul Sartre all consider the concept of freedom, creating a basis for uncovering the answers to some of life’s greatest questions. Through these stories, humankind can begin to decipher the actions it must take to embrace this freedom, and most importantly, the responsibility that comes with absolute liberation. Thus, I argue that each human being can be intrinsically connected while still possessing individual freedom and choice, but this means nothing without deliberate and thoughtful action. We can find examples of human freedom in Sartre’s doctrine and the Hebrew Bible, and explore a cautionary tale in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, arriving at a very specific point: regardless of deities or religious thought, human freedom is a condition dependent on choice, action, responsibility, and a willingness to embrace being alive.

One of the greatest examples of the human quest to harness free will is Sartre, whose dour existentialist message seeks to instill within us a sense of both independence and unification. In great contrast to texts such as Genesis, where G-d creates humankind in G-d’s own image, Sartre says that “man is nothing else but what he makes of himself” (Sartre 345), giving humans the responsibility to create their own unique essence. He also states that “there is

a universality of man” that is “perpetually being made” (Sartre 359), thus adding an element of togetherness to what would otherwise be an incredibly austere school of thought. Although Sartre’s doctrine may come off as isolating, it is actually unifying, as it points out that personal freedom “depends entirely on the freedom of others” (Sartre 363). Because of its ability to make the existentialist both universal and autonomous, Sartre’s doctrine is one of both connection and liberation. While each human is “responsible for all men” (Sartre 346), each other person holds that same responsibility, and the seemingly great task of caring for all humankind is not a solo undertaking. Sartre encourages us to operate mindfully, and when we choose with purpose, we are free.

This responsibility bases Sartre’s definition of freedom on a willingness to choose wisely, since we are not truly free if we do not embrace conscious choice. Sartre states: “I can always choose, but I ought to know that if I do not choose, I am still choosing” (Sartre 360). According to Sartre, choice is inevitable, so it is therefore our responsibility to choose thoughtfully, and truly struggle with our choices. Sartre understands that “freedom is not an object of perception or even reflection. It happens suddenly when I realize that I *participate* in a struggle” (Briedis 76). This “struggle” that Briedis refers to is ultimately the core of freedom, and is one that is widely seen in earlier philosophical and religious works. Sartre asserts that the provocation of thought and the struggle one engages in on the journey to true, existential freedom are paramount in a world where we are entirely alone and free of outside interference.

Some argue that this atheistic form of existentialism only sets humankind up for a greater burden. However, there is something to be said for the way we act when we use society (instead of a divine spark) as a mirror for our everyday lives. When the idea of appeasing G-d is thrown out the window, humankind has to grow up and away from the need for positive reinforcement,

elevating human freedom to an entirely different level. When we can overcome the initial panic that comes whenever we eliminate the idea of an eternal protector, the liberating effects of Sartre's theories become clear. It might seem daunting that we should be forced to take thoughtful action and be responsible for our own mistakes (and their consequences), but this is the very definition of Sartre's freedom. When we can see ourselves as "a series of undertakings" (Sartre 356), we can understand the ultimate reward of those actions and responsibilities: liberation.

The unlikely groundwork for Sartre's view of freedom is none other than the Hebrew Bible, which set the basis for monotheistic thought over three thousand years ago. The real significance of this connection is the resulting negation of Sartre's entire ideology: that without G-d, all things are possible. The fact that Genesis has so much to do with the foundation of human freedom is contrary to Sartre's idea that G-d inhibits freedom. As Fania Oz-Salzberger, a lecturer at the University of Haifa, suggests, "Jewish texts were not accidental sources for the subtle discussion of liberty...there were several important ideas about the nature of freedom" ("The Jewish Roots of Western Freedom"). Stories found in Genesis not only give Sartre something to contest, they suggest that people should truly be forced to think and operate independently. In Genesis, "the LORD G-d formed man from the dust of the earth" (Genesis 2:7), but after man's enlightenment, G-d becomes an entirely separate entity. While G-d isn't afraid to swoop down a forceful hand to flood the earth, destroy cities, or smite specific wrongdoers, G-d does not tamper with the human ability to choose freely. Human beings, the creation G-d made "in our image" (Genesis 1:26), can act according to their own will, even if they must later face consequences. Cain faces punishment after he murders his brother, Abel, as he is marked by G-d and sent away from his home. When the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah become corrupt,

to the point that they would rape angels, they are obliterated from the face of the planet.

However, it's important to note that G-d never directly stops people from committing wicked acts. Instead, G-d allows humankind to learn from the blunders of their brethren and create a moral pathway, setting the groundwork for Sartre's conception of responsibility and morality by forcing humankind to think for itself.

As Genesis progresses, a unique conception of freedom appears: the idea that people are meant to struggle not only with beliefs and morality, but with G-d. Jacob, the last of the three patriarchs, finds himself literally wrestling with G-d...and prevailing. He emerges from this scuffle with the almighty not only victorious, but blessed. The Jewish people are known from then on as Israelites, meaning *those who strive with G-d*. This sets up a new theme for religious freedom as a whole: people are not simply meant to pray and sacrifice to G-d; they are meant to struggle with their beliefs. G-d not only asks humankind to value freedom, but to practice it actively, and constantly question themselves and their ethics in order to create a more just and liberated society. This strife is a very Sartrean concept, and is perhaps the main base for Sartre's later ideas about this "revelatory" struggle that "provokes the possibility of freedom" (Briedis 76). In an unexpectedly Sartrean manner, G-d constantly forces the first generations of humankind in between a rock and a hard place, but not simply for the fun of watching them crawl out. These challenges and tests, such as the almost-sacrifice of Abraham's only son, Isaac, are not simply for G-d to find out about the faith of G-d's creations, but examples of how G-d puts human freedom on trial, trying to see how far any given human being is willing to go in order to assert his or her own will. In the same sense, Sartre strives to prove that human judgment and choice is not simply an arbitrary way to measure human ethics, but is the very making of human freedom: the absolute definition of humankind.

While Judaism's patriarchs and matriarchs all carry the responsibility to ensure the continuation of their line, they also share a unique level of freedom not known to other religions of the time, because unlike earlier polytheistic religions, they learned about freedom from G-d. It's indeed a paradox that both Sartre and Genesis share such a common understanding of freedom, because Sartre bases his entire conception of freedom on a godless existence. Sartre's doctrine expels G-d entirely, and yet a religious text centered entirely on G-d and G-d's creations shares a very similar standpoint on human freedom and free will. Both texts understand that human freedom is based on the choices made by humans themselves, and therefore create the burden of responsibility. However, they also understand that, when fully wrestled with and understood, this responsibility can cause humankind to feel united, centered, and free.

The texts also share a theme of action. An example of this is the story of Joseph, whose extraordinary ability to dream and interpret dreams brings him to a position of high power in Egypt. However, it is not the dreams themselves that are Joseph's greatest asset. Instead, it's his audacity to make his visions and interpretations known that lifts him out of slavery and into the palace of the Pharaoh. Without his courage to act, Joseph would never have been made "fruitful in the land of [his] misfortunes" (Genesis 41:52). Not only would he have remained a prisoner, but Egypt would have suffered a terrible famine for which it would have been completely unprepared. "What people would like is that a coward or hero be born that way" (Sartre 356), but Joseph's story proves that true human freedom is based on the malleability of one's own condition, and is directly tied to one's own actions. Sartre would agree that Joseph's actions were what saved both him and the land of Egypt, because "there is no reality except in action" and "man exists only to the extent that he fulfills himself" (Sartre 355). Joseph's dreams would have merely been ideas had they never been expressed and acted upon, and he would have never

obtained such high levels of responsibility and freedom, thus highlighting the importance of action in building the freedom of an individual and the betterment of a society at large.

Sartre and the Hebrew Bible's ideas about freedom, free will, and human autonomy are a drastic departure from earlier religious texts such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, where freedom and action are separated from humans themselves. Where Sartre and Genesis point out that the only way to obtain freedom is to exercise human will and understand the power of human choice, the story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu tries to assert that divine intervention is a commonplace aspect of human experience. This is especially evident in the fact that Gilgamesh is half-man and half-god, and thus views the entire process of life and death as enslaving. The closer Gilgamesh gets to realizing his own humanity and mortality, the less free he feels. However, the Hebrew Bible and Sartre both see humanity and freedom as a product of mortality, since the limits of mortality place a heightened importance on free choice and thoughtful action.

Another great departure from Sartre and the Hebrew Bible is the polytheistic world in which Gilgamesh and Enkidu live. Gilgamesh's gods are highly anthropomorphized, showing very obvious and tangible displays of envy, greed, lust, and anger, and they are quick to mold and manipulate their creations. In Genesis, G-d creates Adam from the dirt of the earth, but his likeness to clay ends there, whereas Gilgamesh's never ceases. Unlike the Adam's G-d, Gilgamesh's many gods constantly test him simply for the sake of creating trouble or inflating their own egos. They are not necessarily interested in the enlightenment or freedom of Enkidu and Gilgamesh, and are not particularly invested in their development as part of the human species. Furthermore, Gilgamesh and Enkidu have no reliable system on which to base their ethics, for each thing is pleasing to a different god, and their actions may not reap the same results twice. Therefore, in addition to being enslaved to the mortality that he sees as a curse and

a burden, Gilgamesh is enslaved to the ever-changing will of the gods, the elite heavenly club that he can never fully join and never truly depart from.

In fact, this lack of separation between Gilgamesh and the gods inhibits his freedom. In Genesis, G-d is careful to cut the umbilical cord the moment humanity strikes; he forces Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden once they have the knowledge to live, learn, and understand life on their own. However, without the same early lesson-learning seen in the Hebrew Bible, Gilgamesh remains in a childlike state, almost as if he never had to leave his own personal Garden. While he has basic awareness and consciousness, he has no real idea of his own human responsibility, much less a concept of how to properly rule his people. He has all the freedom and power in the world, but it is only skin-deep, for without realizing his responsibility to his people, he cannot truly be free. This shallow degree of freedom is also emphasized after the death of Enkidu, when Gilgamesh's thoughts and desires turn away from plundering and adventure and towards his own identity.

Gilgamesh's newfound infatuation with his own vulnerability and mortality is a major contradiction to the Bible and Sartre. As stated earlier, it roughly tries to connect freedom and immortality, disconnecting human life and liberty. Furthermore, it brings the focus of Gilgamesh's story from celebrating life to trying to understand death. He is portrayed as broken by his encounter with death, as "bitterly he wept for his friend Enkidu...he cried 'How can I rest, how can I be at peace?'" (Gilgamesh 97). This inability to move on from Enkidu's death enslaves Gilgamesh to a life spent wondering about when he will die, which brings him down from his god-learned hubris into a state of depression, vulnerability, and fear, where he further undermines his own freedom by living his life exactly to the predetermined destiny the gods assigned him. Although Gilgamesh gains wisdom, defeats evil forces, and possesses incredible

strength and beauty, he never gains immortality, and therefore he is still enslaved to death.

When his one true brother and friend is taken away from him, Gilgamesh is forced to “find a life that does not depend solely on violence, impulsiveness, and battle” (Abusch 616). However, Gilgamesh’s realization of his mortality does not bring him closer to freedom, and creates a wider gap between the Hebrew Bible, Sartre, and *Gilgamesh*.

The doctrines of Sartre and the Hebrew Bible do not address death to the same extent that *Gilgamesh* does. In Genesis, death occurs, but the focus is not on the dead individual or the bereaved one’s emotions. Instead, death is simply the outcome of life, and the focus remains on those who are living. Even in the very roots of the Hebrew Bible, where the two most powerful trees in the Garden of Eden are the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge, the focus is shifted towards knowledge, as this seems to be the more risqué of the two. The idea that knowledge and truth may be more controversial and key to the human story than mortality itself is something expressed throughout the rest of the Hebrew Bible, constantly drawing attention to life itself. Sartre also avoids the subject, sticking to what our own consciousness can control. When these texts make life the nucleus of their stories and ideas, they make a statement about freedom: that (as far as we know) we can only exercise freedom while we are alive, and therefore life is what we must focus on. G-d tells the Israelites, “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live” (Deuteronomy 30:19). Even Siduri tries to tell Gilgamesh to enjoy life and live in the present, “for this too is the lot of man” (Gilgamesh 192). However, Gilgamesh does not choose to live in the realm of life’s simple pleasures; he chooses to live in the shadow of death, and therefore he does not realize the same freedom that Siduri and the Hebrew Bible discuss.

The freedom to live with purpose, think critically, and act thoughtfully is central when considering the most vital of questions: how is it that we should carry on our lives as individuals, and how will this action translate into a society? Through the three conceptions of freedom and responsibility seen in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Hebrew Bible, and Jean-Paul Sartre's "Existentialism," it can be understood that freedom is only ours if we can fully embrace life and human choice. It's not until we act with wisdom, choose for all humankind, and realize our universal responsibility that we are all free.

Works Cited

- Abusch, Tzvi. "The Development and Meaning of the Epic of Gilgamesh: an Interpretive Essay." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121.4 (2001): 614. Academic Search Complete. EBSCO. Web. 19 Oct. 2010.
- Briedis, Mindaugas. "Phenomenology of Freedom and Responsibility in Sartre's Existentialist Ethics." *Santalka* 17.3 (2009): 71-82. Academic Search Complete. EBSCO. Web. 19 Oct. 2010.
- The New Oxford Annotated Bible. [S.l.]: Oxford UP, 2007. Print.
- Oz-Salzberger, Fania. "The Jewish Roots of Western Freedom." *Azure - Ideas for the Jewish Nation*. June 2002. Web. 25 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.azure.org.il/article.php?id=256>>.
- Sanders, N. K. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. London: Penguin, 2006. Print.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Existentialism." *Basic Writings of Existentialism*. Comp. Gordon Daniel Marino. New York: Modern Library, 2004. Print.