The chips are down'

Sartre's conception of freedom has at least one particularly odd consequence. We can see this in the following way.

Suppose I am confronted by a situation that demands some response of me. For example, I might discover that a friend has betrayed me. There are various ways I could respond: with anger (I want to punish him in some way); with sadness or depression (the meaning seems to have gone out of my life); with self-loathing (I think it must be my fault that he betrayed me); and so on. Further, the situation demands that I do something: I could break off my friendship; I could try to patch things up; I could leave the country; I could plot to have my friend betrayed by someone else; and the like. Suppose I do one thing rather than another. Why do I do this? Well, there must be something about me, about the kind of person I am, that leads me to act as I do (I am a jealous or aggressive or forgiving person, or whatever). Why am I this kind of person in the first place? Sartre says that I am thus because I have chosen to be like this: we each of us
have an ‘original project’ or a ‘fundamental project’, which is the choice of who we are, of our character. Here is the oddity, however. If I have chosen to be a certain kind of person, then when I react in a certain way to my friend’s betrayal of me I am simply playing out the fundamental choice that I have made to be a certain kind of person. This means that I am not really choosing how to react to my friend’s betrayal at all. The choice of how to react was, as it were, made a long time ago when I chose to be a certain kind of person. Moreover, I might not even remember making, or have any sense that I did make, such a choice. But if I have made such a choice then when I react to my friend’s betrayal I am not, after all, really free to behave in one way rather than another. This is why Sartre says in BN that when I deliberate ‘the chips are down’ (les jeux sont faits) (BN: 451). It is also why he says in EH:

[W]hat we usually understand by wishing or willing is a conscious decision taken – much more often than not – after we have made ourselves what we are. I may wish to join a party, to write a book or to marry – but in such a case what is usually called my will is probably a manifestation of a prior and more spontaneous decision. If, however, it is true that existence is prior to essence, man is responsible for what he is.

(EH: 28–9)

It turns out, therefore, that at a given moment of decision we are usually not free. There are exceptions to this, as we shall return to this below. But in the meantime, we need to ask whether there are other problems with Sartre’s conception of freedom.
Are we as free as Sartre supposes?

One of the basic problems with Sartre's theory of freedom seems to be that we simply do not always have the kind of distance from our own psychology that his theory claims. For example, most people find that they have a certain type of character with certain traits and that at least many of these are pretty much impossible to change or get rid of. This might sometimes be because they are in a state of bad faith, trying to resist responsibility for what they are, but it might be because human beings just do have more fixed psychological traits than Sartre supposes. For example, Samuel Johnson (1709–84), who is probably most widely known for producing the first important dictionary of the English language, but who was also a very great writer and man of letters, spent years trying to combat his tendency to indolence and laziness, with very little success. Johnson, however, was certainly not a man who wished to shirk responsibility for what he was. On the contrary, he made enormous demands on himself to be sincere and open in his dealings with himself and others.

Or consider another case. In a discussion of homosexuality in BN (63ff.) Sartre suggests that a homosexual chooses to be homosexual and could thus change
his sexual preferences if he wished. (Sartre would also argue the same for a heterosexual, of course.) But is this true? As Gregory McCulloch has written:

*Do people really choose or have the live possibility of changing their sexuality? Is it not, rather, that some people find themselves sexually attracted to men, others to women and some to both? Certainly, if one is to be straightforward, then sexuality is the sort of thing that has to be taken responsibility for, and this contributes to the sort of person you are. But choice and change are other matters entirely.*

(McCulloch 1994: 67)

One way of putting the criticisms I have made of Sartre is to contrast two conceptions of the self.

Most people believe that the self has very definite traits of character, usually very different from one person to the next. We tend to think, that is, that some people are cowardly, others courageous; some mean, some kind; some people are hard working, whilst others are lazy – although it is not always easy to say what traits of character a person has, even if one knows him very well. It may well be true that we can do more to alter our character than we usually suppose, but we usually think we have a substantial set of character traits. Some moral theories look at things in this way: virtue theory is one of them.

For Sartre, the self is not substantial in terms of having or being made up of character traits. On the contrary, for Sartre, the self is really empty: it is nothing but freedom. This is why, as we have seen, he writes that man is freedom. You are, in fact, nothing but the possibility of being other than you have been hitherto. And it is this idea that I have been criticising.

If these criticisms are correct, we can say that Sartre has an overly optimistic view of human freedom.