

## Question 2: Are we really free?

The core of this question is freedom. Freedom is not an easy or simple concept. I want to start with a definition for freedom. According to the Oxford Desk Dictionary free is defined as “1. Not under another’s control. 2. Autonomous. 3. Unrestricted; not confined or fixed; independent; unattached.” Freedom is defined as “condition of being free or unrestrained.” The most common usage of free and freedom are unrestrained or unrestricted. Basically the ability to do anything without any hindrance. This leads to another question, is it freedom to do something or freedom from something. Freedom to do something means that I am not hindered or prevents from performing and action. Freedom from something means that an oppressive force is no longer acting upon me. These are two different aspects of freedom. The rest of this session will focus on answering the following questions: What is freedom? What is the difference between freedom to and freedom from? What does freedom look like? What are the implications of freedom? Finally, are we truly free? If you recall back to the session on having a good debate, you will notice a problem with this question: it contains a fallacy of accent. The word “really” is unnecessary and hinders the clarity of the question. The question should be: are we free?

### Freedom vs determinism:

Freedom in a common word for American society. We say that we are the “Land of the Free” and that we are to enjoy our “freedoms”, but what does this mean. I defined freedom in the first paragraph as “the condition of being unhindered or unrestrained. In a basic sense, if I am fully free – completely unhindered by anyone or anything – then I should be able to do absolutely everything.

In a completely free world, every action that you perform was chosen by you without any outside influence. Therefore, if we believe that morality exists and culpability for wrong action, you are completely responsible for any good or bad action that you perform; no one else can be blamed for the action and no other source can be at fault. In a completely free world, the consequences of your actions would also be your choice since any action done to you must also be your from your choosing. Another implication of a completely free world is that you can do absolutely anything. You no longer have to be a human, material, or bound by the laws of nature. Absolute unhindered freedom makes anything and everything possible.

The best example of a philosopher who believed in complete freedom was John-Paul Sartre. John-Paul Sartre is best known for his work with the philosophical movement call Phenomenology and within that movement on interpersonal relationships. He reasoned that people are in a constant battle for freedom. Our goal in life is to be completely free to make choices that determine who I am as a person. Other people, however, are constantly making judgements about us that hinder our freedom. Here is one of his examples. I am in a hallway peering through the key hole of a lock in a door. A person walks down the hall and notices me peering into the key hole of the lock. That person is going to judge me as a peeper. I cannot change that judgement and am now considered a peeper. Other philosophers have criticized his extreme stance on freedom using this analogy. Sartre is sitting on a park bench. Every action he makes will change is life. If he gets up, his life will be changed. If he sits on the bench longer,

his life will be changed. If he waits too long to make a decision or too hastily makes a decision, his life will be changed. Sartre is paralyzed by the crushing decision that he must figure out the best decision or face the consequences of limiting his freedom.

Freedom to:

The assumption in this statement – freedom to – implies that outside factors hinder my ability to do something. A few examples should help. If I want to write a book but I have no paper and no writing utensils, the process of writing a book is hindered by my lack of supplies. If I want to drive across the country but I don't have a car, this process is hindered by my lack of a car. If I want to use my body to fly, the composition of my body and the laws of physics prevent me from being able to fly. All of these are examples of ways that we are prevented from performing a given task because something hinders us from being able to perform a specific action.

Freedom from:

The underlying assumption in this statement – freedom from – implies that outside factors are causing our inability to be free. Here are a few examples. Government rulers can impose laws that require citizens to act in a certain way. These laws would then hinder a person from exercising his/ her freedom. Groups of people can oppress or force people to act in a certain way either in a terrorist mentality or as part of membership in a group, Charles Manson is a good example of this idea. The furthest edge of this idea is that the laws of physics and nature are then oppressive forces. Even our race, color, species, and origins are all oppressive forces that we need freedom from if we are to be completely free.

Determinism is the exact opposite of freedom. Determinism states that everything that you do is already predetermined and you are bound to do that which has been set for you. In a deterministic world free actions do not exist and neither do the consequences. You are bound to follow the system as though you were a robot following the instructions of the programmer.

In a completely deterministic world, every action you perform is the result of some other force; you had no power in making the decision or performing the action. Therefore, if we believe that morality exists and culpability for wrong action, you cannot be blamed for any of your actions; someone else, namely the programmer, is responsible for each action you perform. A further implication is that you cannot change anything about your situation. If you are poor, you will always be poor unless an outside force changes your status. If you are a bird, you will always be a bird unless someone changes your life form. You cannot change anything about you.

In the above analysis of freedom and determinism I took both sides to their furthest extreme to show the clearest implications of these thoughts. Most people do not side completely on one side but usually believe something closer to the middle: we are somewhat free and somewhat determined. The exact details of the middle we will explore later.

I would love to have a clear example of a deterministic world, but we usually abhor this kind of outcome. In movies where freedom is removed from the people, normally the hero emerges as the one who breaks from the mold and restores freedom; we cannot let the bad guys control us. Several movies and books try to explore the theme of a world devoid of freedom: Brave New

World, Gattaca, Fahrenheit 451, the Matrix, the Traveler, V for Vendetta, Hunger Games. These movies have one thing in common: an oppressive force is limiting the freedom of the people and forcing them to believe and act in a certain way. If they made a movie in which everyone has no freedom or power, it would be a very boring movie; nothing would happen.

### **Implications of freedom:**

Morality and culpability:

If we are completely free then we are always and completely culpable for our actions. If a rock falls off a cliff and hits my car as I was driving down the interstate, I am responsible for that wreck and the rock falling from the cliff. If I lie, cheat, or steal, I am completely culpable for these actions. The issue of morality and culpability quickly becomes grey as we move closer to a deterministic world view. If I suffered from a mental disorder, how culpable am I for my actions? If I suffered childhood trauma or I was raised in such a way that I thought my actions are right, how culpable am I? How much is society and circumstances part of the discussion of morality? If I killed a person because they invaded my house and I couldn't tell what I was shooting at, how culpable am I? If I am up on a cliff and slip on a rock that caused another rock to fall which causes a boulder to fall which takes out a tree that falls on a passing car and kills a family of four, how culpable am I?

Self-determinism and self-actualization:

The core questions in this pair is how able am I to create myself? The movie Gattaca, the book Brave New World, and Shawshank Redemption are all good examples of the issues present in these words. Before I explore these three examples, I want to define and clarify what I mean by these words. Self-determinism is the idea that I dictate who I am, and I can change myself by my own choice. Self-actualization is the idea that I have a purpose or mission and that I am most fully myself when I realize and live this. In the movie Gattaca, the society controls the classes by genetic modification. The highest levels of society are people whose parents manipulated their children's DNA to remove any defects and problems. The lowest rung of society is born without any modifications, and, more specifically, usually with defects. The same theme runs in Brave New World in which the society has genetically modified all humans so that they are born into a class. Each class has its own attributes specific to the job they will perform. In both of these media, self-determination is based on what the society has chosen for the individual and the individual is forced into that mold. Their actualization is determined by the society based on the function they perform, hence a form of determinism. In the movie Shawshank Redemption the main character is forced to fit a mold that he fights against. The movie is the story of his struggle for freedom: freedom from prison, freedom from the confinement of fitting a specific role or judgment, freedom to live life fully. The underlying question in this category is can we determine ourselves?

Suffering, illness, pain, and well-being:

If we are fully free, then sickness, pain, illness, and our well-being are all part of our choice. If we are not free, then these are imposed upon us and there is nothing we can do to prevent them.

The middle between these two ideas is far more interesting. I cannot control whether I am sick, in pain, or feeling well, but I have the power to choose how I react to it. On another note, returning to the topic of mental health, if I am in a state of chronic pain that causes me to react a certain way, am I morally culpable for my actions?

Free-will:

The term free-will is used extensively by the Church to explain our power to make choices. Free-will is based on the idea that we are always free to make choices for ourselves even in the most dire situations. This power to choose is a God-given ability that is directed toward one good: the power to love, and, namely, to love God. Since free-will is rooted in the human being, and not in the external, this power cannot be taken away or reduced by external factors. Free-will is linked closely with the morality topic from earlier. Because I can freely choose how I act, I am always to some extent culpable for my actions.

Love:

Love is a free expression of self-gift to another person. In order to love a person, you need to have the freedom to give yourself to that person. Without freedom (free-will, self-determinism), you cannot love another person. Instead you would be forced by external powers to show an emotional response to another that has no aspect of you, the individual, in it. Freedom is necessary to love.

Freedom and autonomy:

Although this may seem like I am repeating a topic already covered, I feel the need to take a nuanced spin of the word freedom. In modern society, especially in the United States, the cry for freedom is rooted in the desire to be free to do whatever I want without any consequences. If you don't believe me, watch the news, reality TV, or soap operas. These sources show that people are fighting for a sense of personal autonomy: you can't tell me what to do? Why can't you respect my choices? I am free to do whatever I choose with (fill in the blank)? These questions/statements show a misunderstanding of freedom. Instead of desiring freedom for the sake of personal growth, freedom is desired for personal autonomy. Is this possible? Can we achieve personal autonomy from all things so that we are completely free?

### **Are we really free?**

The answer to this question is yes and no. We have the freedom to make choices, realize our potential and live it, love, and feel the consequences of our actions. But, we will always have factors that limit us and hinder our personal autonomy: society, laws of nature, place of origins, upbringing, corporality (the fact that we are in a body), the past events of our lives, limitations of choices, consequences for actions. The bigger question in this discussion is: how much do we want to be free? Absolute freedom means that I am completely in control of everything. Do we want that? Does freedom lead to happiness? I sense that those who are most free, are the least happy. Look at the very rich and the very poor. We have the freedom to live and love. We do not have the freedom to overcome the universe.