

Quote number 2, by Thomas Nagell

In essence, Thomas Nagel's quote deals with the question of free will. Can we as conscious human beings defy the sum of arbitrary circumstances leading up to a decision? Or are we, as a product of conditions beyond our control, pre-destined to always arrive at the same inevitable conclusion - just under the illusion that it was a result of active deliberation? This is a question whose answer depends on many different, though often interconnected, factors; a person's religious belief, moral values and individual background all play a part in informing his or her view regarding the nature of free will. Still, they generally all result in arguments that can be placed under one of two competing schools of thought.

First there are the existentialists. In the tradition of Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre, existentialism is based upon a deep-rooted belief in the importance of choice. Every human being is born into infinite freedom, and it is the responsibility of each and every individual to create through one's actions one's own personal meaning in life. There is no objective truth to unearth, or hidden goal dictating our common existence. It is rather through actively engaging with our surroundings, taking deliberate, individual choices and being held responsible for them that we dynamically create our own reality. We have the ability to form our own fate – in fact, we have no fate, the point being that nothing is predetermined. This view, then, necessitates the existence of free will: without it the defining element of our existence would be up to arbitrary coincidences, rendering the whole train of thought contradictory. How are we to define ourselves through the choices we make, if the concept of true choice doesn't exist?

The other side of the argument, the determinists, avoid this question by taking a completely different approach in trying to define our existence. Determinism postulates that our existence is beyond our control, that our lives are determined from the second we are born, through "a person's experiences, desires and knowledge, his hereditary constitution, the social circumstances and the nature of the choice facing him...". In other words, we are formed by the external factors surrounding us, ones we have no control over, into a type of person who, confronted with the same choice, would always make the same decision. Thus the concept of free will becomes an illusion; we only *believe* that we are making a choice, when in fact it is the only choice available to us.

This last view does however create its own problem. If there is no such thing as free will, what happens then to moral responsibility? Our whole society is based upon the assumption that one has to take responsibility for one's actions. If we don't study hard, we get bad grades; if we commit a crime, we are punished accordingly. But if our actions lie beyond our control, how can we with moral righteousness hold people responsible for them? To apply this belief practically, we would then have to give up the whole concept of responsibility. Every hurtful action, poor judgment or dangerous neglect could be excused with a shrug of the shoulders. Some could argue that personal responsibility, the one derived from having a free will, can be replaced by the judgment of God. But this merely shifts the question: How can God, then, punish or reward man for conditions he Himself is responsible for?

In my opinion, neither of these two arguments holds the absolute truth. It appears obvious to me

that our free will is indeed influenced and biased by surroundings and conditions we have no part in creating, but I believe nonetheless in its fundamental existence. Our behavioral patterns may sometimes seem pre-set, but in order to justify our innate belief in justice on which our whole societal structure rests, it is necessary to also believe in our ability to challenge our assumptions and go against our natural inclinations. In addition, doesn't the very acknowledgement of free will mean in a sense that it exists? If we make a decision in good faith, believing it is our own, free choice, doesn't this in practicality make it so? Acknowledging that a decision we made was our own, we must also acknowledge that we had the opportunity to make an alternative one, creating then at least in our consciousness the idea of a free will and the belief that we are our in control of our own lives. Acknowledging and acting in this good faith will then also make us contemplate the idea of free will each time we are about to make a decision, making it an actual element in the decision making process and therefore influencing our final choice - thus as an entity with real consequences in a way proving its own existence.

I therefore disagree with the fundamental view described in Thomas Nagel's quote, while still recognizing the importance of the conditions it ascribes, instead of free will, to the decision making process. While we are certainly influenced by circumstances of which we have no control, at the end of the day it is my belief, due to the arguments discussed above, that the choices we make are ultimately of our own.