

## Morality, Freedom and Responsibility

There are many philosophies in the Humanities concerning morality, freedom and responsibility. These philosophies seem to fall into three general categories: determinism or the belief that all things that happen are predetermined, a belief in *a priori* rules or set guidelines that lie within all of us, and existentialism or belief that every action and happening is the result of a completely free choice. A belief in *a priori* rules seems to fall between the extreme belief systems of existentialists and determinists, and I would think that is the category under which most people fall.

Several materials we covered in this class show a leaning toward one philosophy or another. With the essay "Existentialism" by Jean-Paul Sartre, we are given a definition of existentialism: "Existence precedes essence." This means that things only take on meaning after they are created, and that all of our plans are meaningless unless they actually turn into something real. Existentialism also says that nothing is preordained; "Man is condemned to freedom," according to Sartre. Because we cannot prove the existence of a being or doctrine that defines good for all of humanity, (different societies create different doctrines that define different standards of good and evil) we cannot act on the guidelines of those beings or doctrines and know that we are truly doing the right or good thing. Therefore, we are making a choice based on personal beliefs. Our personal beliefs do not stem from an *a priori* good, or a concrete definition of good; they are merely a personal choice and a personal definition of good. This illustrates the idea of subjectivity. Subjectivity means that all things are subject to interpretation by people. Existentialism philosophy is a philosophy of subjectivity.

In "The Anguish of Abraham" we see the philosophies of existentialism in action. Abraham is commanded by an angel of God to sacrifice his son in order to prove to God that he has faith in God. Yet, Abraham cannot really know if it is an angel of God that is speaking to him; he only has the word of this ethereal being to go on. He cannot be sure that he is doing the right thing, so he is left with a choice to kill or not kill his son, and he has no guarantees of its rightness. The idea of no guarantees in life is one of the central points of existentialism. We cannot be sure that the future will turn out the way we want or hope, and we cannot be sure of the outcomes of any of our choices. There is no proof that a divine Providence exists, thereby there is no certainty that we are making the "right" choices.

The theme of anguish is covered in "The Anguish of Abraham," the story "The Guest," by Albert Camus, and the essay by Sartre. Anguish is defined as the uncertainty and doubts in making a choice because one cannot be sure what the outcome will be or know if it is right or wrong. In "The Anguish of Abraham" Abraham experiences anguish by not knowing if sacrificing his son is right or wrong, nor does he know if the angel is really a servant of God, just an illusion, or even a manifestation of evil. In "The Guest," we are introduced to three characters: Daru, Balducci, and the Arab. Daru is a teacher, and Balducci is a gendarme, or policeman. The Arab is a prisoner of Balducci's. Balducci brings his prisoner to Daru and orders Daru to take the Arab to Tinguit and turn the prisoner in. Daru hesitates over this choice because he is sympathetic to the rights of the Arabs and, thereby, experiences anguish. Daru is not sure if turning the Arab in is right or not. Eventually, Daru makes the choice not to decide the Arab's fate and lets the man go. He is existentialist because he accepts the responsibility for his choice; for, this is one of the

tenets of existentialism. Because an existentialist is free in choosing, he must accept the outcomes of his choices.

Determinism is the exact opposite of existentialism. Determinism is the philosophy that we are not free, and that everything we do is preordained. B.F. Skinner was a determinist. Skinner believed strongly in psychological conditioning, and he proved it with his tests on rats. To him, the theory of conditioning was enough to suggest the absence of true choice. For, if one could make a rat do something by a system of rewards and punishments, then people are probably conditioned in the same way. Skinner believed that if one were to take a list of everything that has happened in a person's life, then one could predict every choice that person would ever make and his or her actions in each case. Determinism philosophy proposes the idea that there is absolutely no such thing as freedom, and that pursuing freedom is a hopeless quest.

The video, "On the Bus," and the story "The New Atlantis," by Ursula LeGuin seem to cover the theory of determinism. Both of these stories portray a society where man has systematically and almost totally destroyed the Earth. Determinists such as Machiavelli and Glaucon suggest that man is inherently selfish and destructive, and that there is no way around it. These two stories present such worlds where this is the truth. The society that is portrayed in both stories believes that humans cannot handle the idea of freedom. Most humans in both stories follow the status quo blindly. The few that do not, often suffer mightily for going against the tide. The main character of "On the Bus" is executed because he feels emotion and talks of parks. The narrator of "The New Atlantis" must leave her home or risk her husband's fate: being put into a mental institution or worse. He was too independent and broke the rules by marrying the narrator and was never heard from again. LeGuin's story suggests that the same thing would probably happen to the narrator if she were to stay at home.

The whole idea of determinism suggests pure cynicism to me. It seems to say, "Why bother to think? For, you have no choice in what you do or what happens to you." It seems extreme and foolish to give other people such power over my thoughts and actions. I tend to believe that there are some *a priori* rules, but we still maintain quite a bit of freedom.

*A priori* rules are rules that remain the same no matter what happens; these rules apply to everything and everyone. In the video, "A Cry of Freedom" we see this degree of freedom mixed in with an obedience to set, universal rules. It is suggested in the video that, even though we have some degree of freedom, we always have to follow some guidelines. Part of the difficulty in being completely free lies in the inability to define freedom, but the majority of the difficulty lies with the limitations that society places on us. The fact that every person on this earth is part of a society should suggest a concrete rule. A group of people will always communicate and set up some rules for themselves. These groups are called societies and it seems that we have no choice in the matter of forming them. These societies also form some degree of a hierarchy also. There is always someone considered to be a leader in one form or another. The only way to escape this is to move away from people altogether, but then it could be argued that the person who deigns other human company is forming his own society. This pattern that people demonstrate in forming societies is evident in the animal kingdom. Plants will even group themselves together into an area.

In these societies, we all have some degree of freedom. However, there are boundaries, or laws that are set up, and we only have a limited degree of freedom in breaking them. For example, in "A Cry of Freedom," Socrates is devoted to thought and reason in an age of religious zeal. Devotion to the church and higher ideals were the status quo. Socrates, who said, "The capacity for thought is man's greatest attribute", was accused of being an atheist and sentenced to death by the church. "Heretics" through the ages have often had to suffer such fates for breaking status quo. Perhaps this tendency, on the part of humankind, suggests that *a priori* rules are somewhat flexible. With an *a priori* rule that says "One must follow the basic tenets of his or her society in order to survive", such flexibility is allowed.

In "The Outer Circle," I believe we are shown another *a priori* rule. The video suggests that, even though we are subject to the rules of society, there will always be someone who cannot or will not live with the status quo. This person, or persons, will be bound to speak out against the status quo. Humans have the opposing needs of the need for certainty and for the unknown. The outer circle is that portion of a society that stands outside of the set guidelines within a society. The outer circle exists in every society and seems to demonstrate that no society is perfect. I believe the *a priori* rule here is that a balance must always be maintained. No one set of beliefs, attitudes or lifestyles can prevail totally. All possibilities must exist, even if they oppose one another.

I don't see why *a priori* rules cannot exist in philosophy and thought, when they exist in nature. Gravity is an absolute fact, so is energy. All things are composed of particles, even light. These things exist and will always exist, regardless of whether science acknowledges them or not. If such things as gravity are concrete, consistent and not subject to question or denial, why wouldn't certain things be common to all humans? We all must eat, breathe and sleep. Why wouldn't the rules governing the basic facts of life extend to the mind and spirit?

I see an *a priori* rule in human beings' quest for balance. The search to balance any opposing thoughts or beliefs is common in all of us. We may all disagree about what that balance is, but isn't it possible that this difference may stem from the differences in stimuli that bombard us or the degree of freedom we do have? Nature exemplifies the idea of balance; for each winter there is a summer. Forests burn down and regrow. For everything that dies by nature's hand, there is a new thing that is born. Perhaps the reason our quest for balance fails is because we are often uncertain of what is good or bad, or because of that degree of freedom that can blind us to what balance really is. The subjectivity of freedom (demonstrated in the philosophy of existentialism) may cause us to put our own interpretations into balance. I believe that when you mix an *a priori* rule with freedom, you come up with an equation that works most of the time but still allows for exceptions.

Perhaps one of the strongest arguments I can see for *a priori* rules is the human need to communicate. We try to communicate, however briefly, with each and every intelligent creature we come in contact with. Even if the communication involves simply saying, "I do not wish to talk with you" or is a nonverbal signal such as a mild reaction to an insult, it is still communication. Body language signals that indicate "I will pass on your right side; you pass me on my right side" when people approach one another on the street are still communication. It seems we have no choice but to communicate with one another.

I think that believing in such a balance between *a priori* rules and free choice is probably the wisest idea. Existentialism and determinism are a bit extreme and allow for little flexibility. Most philosophies, whether it be religious beliefs or something like epicureanism, base themselves around such a balance. I think that existentialism and determinism do have valid points to their arguments; however, we must admit that we are not 100% free in our choices. If we were, our choices would be infinite in every situation. Since our choices are limited in number for any given situation, we cannot be totally free. Jesus told us all not to accept gifts. I wonder if that's an *a priori* rule.

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