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"Much Ado About Determinism"

I often find myself thinking about how I got to where I am. All the little things that had to happen. The millions of years of ancestors, all the way back to single cells in a pond, my grandparents meeting, my parents finding each other at work and getting married. It's a statistical anomaly that I exist the way I do, at existential and biological levels. The odds of any one sperm becoming a person are unimaginably low. And the fact that it was the one unique sperm with its DNA that made it, which now wholly defines me, seems impossible. All that thinking has convinced me that people are the product of their biology and environment, which has led me to become a determinist. Determinism is simply the idea that our future is predetermined and that if we reset the entire universe, every event would happen exactly as it already has. I would end up right back here writing this essay. Some people believe in determinism for religious reasons, but I think it's simply the nature of who we are.

People often seem incredibly complex, but when I look at humans, especially myself, and try to really understand why we are who we are, the list of factors that could be affecting us seems nearly infinite. I can't stop thinking about how my decisions are influenced by previous decisions and aspects outside my control. Even things so core to my identity, like my atheism, political beliefs, and sense of humor, are direct results of the people and environments I've been raised around. My family has only ever practiced religion through holidays; my parents have always openly discussed politics and allowed me to have my own beliefs, and my four siblings and I have always teased and joked around with each other. I wonder what would have happened had I been born as an only child to a devoutly religious family; such core parts of my identity would likely be wildly different. So are those identities part of me or just byproducts of the conditions I was in.

One implication of my belief in determinism is that it leaves no room for free will, which is weird to think about. Free will is an assumption required for everything: individualism, capitalism, the justice system, and our understanding of ourselves and others. Without free will, our whole system falls apart, which is precisely the stance of many determinists like myself. Our world has been designed unfairly: virtues and achievements have been given too much value while the effects of our biology and environments have been largely ignored.

I've always taken some pride in my academic success during high school. I tried hard, I learned how to work through my learning disability, and I did extra when I didn't have to. But, because I believe in determinism, I have to accept that maybe I was only capable of that because I was born to a wealthy family who had the resources to tutor me at a young age, pay for private education, and give me the security to only ever have to worry about school. How much of it was really me? Am I unique, or would any kid given the same opportunity have done the same? Or maybe my brain was predisposed to succeed in our institutions, and other kids weren't so fortunate.

Accepting that I can only credit my circumstances for any successes I've had takes me back to my point from earlier. Our society puts so much value on those successes; that's what capitalism is built on: the idea that anyone has the same opportunity to prosper, no matter their situation. By reframing everything from the determinism perspective, we can have more sympathy for those who have succeeded and maybe design a better system for everyone.

I've been thinking about determinism for a while. Still, I've thought about it more this year and attribute it to the whole college process. Doing college applications is a really strange form of self-reflection. You have to compile a set of essays, grades, tests, and activities that are supposed to tell every college everything about you. The worst part is that it largely defines at least the next four years of your life. So, during the whole process of making the application, you have to think about how all your past choices about which sports to play, which tests to study extra hard for, which clubs to join, and how to spend your free time will affect the next four years of your life. And then add on my belief in determinism, and it all starts to seem arbitrary; does one person really deserve to get into one college more than another if the things being considered are entirely out of their control.

Along with that self-reflection, I've discovered a weird type of guilt, and maybe guilt isn't quite the right word, but it's not completely wrong. Part of me feels guilty about having things so good. There are people all over the world experiencing extreme poverty and all sorts of tragedies, and here I am, worrying about free will and determinism. I think I would describe my guilt as a sort of predictive guilt. I'm worried I will waste the incredible advantages I was born into, and the only way to overcome this guilt is to do something meaningful with the conditions I've been given.