

To what extent is freedom of will needed to give decisions meaning?

For many of us, the concept of freedom of choice is an absolute necessity for our humanity. The possibility that we are not the masters of our fates becomes a constant source of anxiety. If we are not free why should we care about fate or even continue living in the first place? The crisis of life without meaning is a defining concept in existential philosophy and is Bender's plight in "Free Will Hunting". When Bender discovers he lacks free will, suddenly his lifetime of criminal achievements seems meaningless. Feeling insignificant and unfulfilled, Bender resigns himself to a pointless life. This lead me to consider the question, to what extent is freedom of will needed to give decisions meaning? To explore the question I will examine two philosophical standpoints—one of meaning through free will and the other of meaning with soft determinism. Specifically, I will address meaning's basis in free will put forward by Sartre and the possibility of meaning in a determined world put forward by Nietzsche and Camus.

Bender reaches a point of crisis when the judge rules in favor of his innocence on account of his lack of free will. In his own words, "What's the point of living if I don't have free will?" Bender defined himself through his actions and their results, the notion that others could say "Bender didn't do that! It was just Bender's programming!" absolutely crushed Bender's complete sense of self. The need for freedom when finding meaning is an essential aspect of Sartre's existential philosophy. Sartre's thoughts on freedom originate from his interpretation of consciousness. From his perspective, consciousness must always refer to external objects beyond itself. In this state of

consciousness, the self is nonexistent; the external object is the subject of my consciousness not my relation to it. The self is only discovered and in fact created through metacognitively reflecting upon consciousness. A chaotic array of thoughts and interpretations present themselves in the consciousness resulting from actions and the self must somehow impose an order upon this incomprehensible freedom. Freedom, in this sense, is horrifying. The individual is capable of anything and everything leading to a growing feeling of anxiety. In a crisis of consciousness, the individual is aware of the superfluous nature of their being in comparison with the vast extent of freedom. Yet the self does exist in this meaningless world and somehow an individual must create an ultimate meaning for himself or herself from this terrifying freedom.

From this perspective, the self is volatile and unstable, a creation of the consciousness different in every moment. However, according to Sartre, not only is the self created but the world is a creation of the individual. From a Sartrean view, I bestow values upon the world rather than them preexisting. The only meaning life has is that which the individual bestows upon it. Therefore, there is no defining code of the universe; all values are objectively equal. An individual is free to endlessly create new worlds and values and are in fact condemned to do just that. To truly lead a meaningful life, the self and its values must be chosen with “good faith”. In essence, an individual must accept responsibility for their freedom rather than blaming outside factors because, using this ultimate freedom, it is up to the self to decide upon the meaning of every experience and action. Even in the face of facticity, meaning is up to interpretation. In order for an individual’s decisions to have meaning, they must

recognize the absurdity of existence in relation to its staggering freedom but persevere to create worlds upon worlds for themselves, essentially fashioning their own personal paradise.

Conversely, Nietzsche's concept of the eternal recurrence presents a possible take on life where personal meaning is possible in a determined world. In eternal recurrence, an individual is fated to repeat and has repeated the same life for all eternity, bound to look on as they endlessly make their way through the same experiences. Nietzsche illustrates this concept with the story of the demon in the night posing the question: in the recurrence, would you be able to become yourself and crave nothing more than your eternal fate (The Gay Science)? In essence, Nietzsche is arguing that recurrence is not terrifying but is in fact a blessing. Even in a determined world, individuals are free in their consciousness. With this freedom of thought, it is up to the individual to personally interpret and decide upon the meaning of every experience. Knowing this, the individual gains the realization that they are the master of life's meaning even with a determined fate. Through elevation of consciousness, the recurrence becomes a personal paradise. In the mind the individual is all-powerful, for there they can be free from all bonds of morality and necessity. Pain can be conceived as pleasure and the full extent of a life's experience can be fashioned for whatever value the individual desires. The principles of the recurrence still hold in a regular finite life: regardless of the existence of freedom of will, the meaning of an experience is a creation of the consciousness fully determined by the individual.

Camus furthers the soft deterministic argument by addressing the apparent futility of a fated existence. Camus formulates his thoughts around the key question: if we are not free what is the point in living, in fact, why shouldn't we just commit suicide and escape this fated existence (The Myth of Sisyphus)? For Camus the origin of a meaningful life is the result of facing and accepting the notion of life's futility. Rather than simply resigning oneself to a meaningless life, Camus puts forward the notion of acceptance as a triumph. To illustrate this concept, Camus uses an analogy to the myth of Sisyphus. For his vitality and refusal to submit to the gods, Sisyphus was condemned to endlessly toil at a cyclical, pointless task. As his punishment, Sisyphus was bound to dedicate his entire being into forcing a boulder up a slope only to have it come crashing back down the other side at the seeming moment of success. Reminded of his crushing fate, Sisyphus would once more need to make the journey back down the slope. In this space of consciousness, Sisyphus has the chance to be stronger than his rock.

From one perspective, this moment of awareness is the epitome of Sisyphus's wretched condition. Grieving and wistfully longing for his past life, he has no choice but to trudge down to the rock and once again relive his torturous fate. Yet it is possible for one to imagine Sisyphus happy. During the descent, Sisyphus lets go of all notions of higher destiny or past lives. Sisyphus is able to accept his fate as his own and in doing so becomes its master. In this Sisyphus can take joy, his fate is now a human condition and the rock his own thing. In the moment of consciousness when he returns to his rock, Sisyphus can take pride in his struggle which is wholly his own. The monks of the Order of the Binary Singularity come to this same realization. In the words of the abbot, "For

though we must always obey our programming with no deviation whatsoever, we choose to take satisfaction in the ritual. So, are we automatons? Yes. But we are magnificent automatons.” By accepting one’s fate and the struggle that accompanies it, then an individual’s decisions gain a wholly personal, joyous meaning regardless of their predetermined nature.

I personally do not feel that certainty of freedom is a prerequisite for a meaningful life. While Bender makes the claim that his actions are pointless and insignificant if they did not come from his own volition, in the episode, Amy points out the fact that “we don’t even know if humans are free”. This brings up the point that regardless of whether or not free will exists, human beings still make their ways through life without worrying if their choices are truly meaningful. Meaning is a wholly conscious creation not simply a secondary aspect of an action. This becomes apparent to me when I see how different players react while playing baseball and making costly mistakes. Some players will shake their heads, punching their gloves or throwing helmets and bats, personally enraged by their own actions. After a game their heads will be lowered and their eyes red feeling depressed and disappointed. But others will nod and continue on, treating the mistake as a learning experience and a chance to do better in the future. In essence, these are simply two different conscious interpretations of the same event. The individual decides the meaning of the event, whether or not they were free to enact the decision is insignificant for the conscious realization that life is meaningful.

Where Sartre’s argument puts forward an explanation for how meaning is derived from freedom, Nietzsche and Camus present a contrasting viewpoint where

meaning is possible without free will. For Sartre, meaningful decisions are the result of acting in accordance with nature of the self. Only actions done in “good faith” can be meaningful and genuine. However, Nietzsche makes the claim through the concept of the eternal recurrence that meaning is simply a conscious creation separate from actions themselves. It does not matter whether or not the self enacted the decision; the nature of meaning is simply a creation of consciousness. Camus makes the additional claim that meaning is simply a product of personal satisfaction. If the individual can accept and take a quiet, personal joy in their fate then their decisions gain meaning regardless of the nature of their origin. Freedom of will is not a requirement for freedom as evidenced by the arguments of Camus and Nietzsche. However, the freedom that Sartre presents allows for an individual to choose and enact a meaningful life to the fullest possible extent. This is the key reason why Bender and most people see free will as an absolute necessity for a meaningful life. Bender’s final shout of “Ah, yeah! Guilty!” is an outpouring of jubilation resulting from his realization that life is truly meaningful.

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