

The Paths of Life

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Author's Note:

Why do I believe what I believe in?

My mother – my father; they have passed on their beliefs to me. Instilled in my head are the lessons and morals that they, as children, learned. In my head are the lessons learned from the mistakes they have made in their lifetimes. Here are the sermons heard at church by my mother as a young girl and...here is the kindness and rigidity, strictness of both mother and father. Here is the pain and suffering that teaches us to be strong and keep moving forward. Here is what I believe in.

The beauty of belief comes not in what one believes, but in why. How does one come to believe in such things?

My mother says to me, "Believe in God. Everything he does is for a reason. And remember that he never allows for things you can't handle to happen." It is one of the most predominant philosophies that my mother has instilled in me, but she has left room for free will. She believes in following the heart. I find the collaboration of such a beautiful entity as God and myself to be amazing. The thought that I am able to create my own future, my own path in life, and have God by my side to protect and guide me through only the best of the best. It is like a child's fictional story, really.

Where do these two meet? Is it possible for God to have a say in one's life, for God to destine a certain path and, at the same time, allow one's free will to pilot the soul?

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A lot of what we believe in comes from the very beginnings of our lives; from the things that our parents teach us to believe in, or the experiences that we learn from. For a long time I have believed that every single life on earth has a purpose; I have always accepted the fact that God creates our destinies. God creates the beginning, middle, and end of our lives; he controls how, when, and where we come into this life and exactly how we leave it. He is there every single step of the way, making sure that nothing disrupts the course of all "natural" things. But at the same time, I believe that we still possess the quality of freedom, and with this – free will.

There are three main belief sets about existence. They are: the belief that our lives are predestined, determined by the Divine. The belief that our lives are led by our very own free will. Then there are those who believe in chance, arguing that life is as a game of billiards. Whether one's life is actually piloted by one of these theories is up to the faith of the individual. One must keep in mind their religion, and their philosophy of life. Philosophers such as John Calvin, Immanuel Kant, and David Hume have all interpreted their own versions of these concepts.

Predestination, in theology, is the belief of a divine-being that foreknows all that will happen; with regard to the salvation of some and not others. This belief is widely spread throughout a handful of religions including Judaism. One of the more famous theologians who has studied and interpreted this belief is John Calvin. John Calvin, French theologian and pastor during the Protestant Reformation, believed that “Predestination is God’s unchangeable decree from before the creation of the world that he will freely save some people (the elect), foreordaining them to eternal life, while the others (the reprobate) would be barred from access to salvation and sentenced to ‘eternal death’” (Calvin 1). John Calvin is interpreting Predestination in a very literal sense, telling us that God’s proclamation was a way of deciding who lives an eternal life and who is destined to a life without salvation and eternal death. John is telling us that our fates are fixed, nothing that we do throughout our lives, assuming one is entitled to free will, can save us from or change our fates. From a Christian perspective, one may assume that John interprets *eternal life* as continued life after death and *eternal death* as not a place of fiery torment, but rather a common grave of humankind, a place and time of unconsciousness. Predestination allows for a foundation, one that cannot be changed, created by the Divine, ensuring eternal life or death.

Although God’s intention in Predestination is to, essentially, decide who lives an eternal life and who is destined to eternal death, the concept may lead to a much broader interpretation. Many believe that through Predestination and God’s foreknowledge, one’s entire life course is destined—designed and planned out, from beginning to end.

Free will, unlike Predestination, is not based off of God’s foreknowledge. The principle of free will has both religious and ethical implications. Free will, in terms of religion, implies that individual will and choices can coexist with an omnipotent divinity. Although in ethics, it may question an individual’s moral accountability for their actions. Free will stands as the theory that divinity holds no say in the overall course of an individual’s life, everything occurs solely through intention. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* quotes Hugh J. McCann, professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago, saying, “McCann (1998: 180) holds that an agent’s exercise of active control has two aspects: any basic action is a spontaneous, creative undertaking on the part of the agent, and it is intrinsically intentional. Again, the intentionality of a basic action is said to be a matter of its being intrinsically an occurrence that is meant, by the individual undergoing it, to be her doing” (Clarke 1). Hugh is stating that free will is the concept of complete control. Everything that occurs is a result of one’s intentional decisions throughout the course of life, inevitably and ultimately determining death. Because the Divine is absent or at least not in control of what takes place, faith plays a much smaller part in our lives. There is no longer need to believe in a religion; there is no longer need for a supernal being.

Between these two theories is compatibilism. It is the perfect combination of both free will and Predestination. This philosophy relies heavily on both of these theories, stating that one can be free, and in control, but with the existence of determinism. French philosopher, mathematician, writer and father of modern philosophy, René Descartes, and Scottish philosopher and historian David Hume were both compatibilist, believing that free will is entirely compatible with physical determinism. Determinism being, as described by the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “facts of the past, in conjunction with the laws of nature, leading to every truth about the future” (McKenna 1). René Descartes held a dualistic theory where he believed that “physical events are determined although human actions have a liberty of

indifference because the soul is not material” (Descartes 1). Descartes is stating that because the human soul is not a solid form, both spiritually and physically, and because it is ever-changing, it is impossible to determine or predetermine its course, but it is completely possible for events, occurring in the real, physical, world to be organized and predetermined. This allows for a balance in religious and philosophical belief.

In thinking of these theories, one may assume that these are the only three ways of existence, but this is false. One learns through time that life is controlled by the being all along. In choosing to believe in a specific faith, one is devoting themselves to beliefs that come with that religion, thus establishing a view on how a life is then created. It is important to remember our religion, but also to never forget our philosophies of life. It is with this that we are fully honest and understand our lives. Our philosophies are what allow us to see, with a clarity and reality, what our lives actually look like.

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