

“Freedom is a facade perceived to prove the existence of our choices.” That was the first statement made in a discussion I had with my friend Bob about free will. He argued that freedom is non-existent because of three limiting factors: past experiences, societal pressures, and pure chance. Are we really free if all of these forces shape our actions?

A common thought experiment asks someone to choose between an apple and a banana. Reader, if I were to ask you this question at this moment, you would give one of two answers. If you chose the apple, that may be because of the fondness you have from a memory, the absence of bananas in your life, or its taste was something you preferred in the moment. According to Bob’s argument, you had no freedom choosing the apple; your past had already determined your answer, an idea known philosophically as determinism. Rather than your own freedom, the pieces were set in place, making the decision for you.

Since birth, our ability to make choices has been a result of our own human nature. While the many factors that make up our lives influence our decisions, they don’t dictate our actions. Similarly, our freedom to make choices often extends beyond our own lives, creating a chain of consequences that both shape our own lives and extend into the realities of others. This interwoven web of actions supports the foundation of Bob’s argument, reasoning that these actions are only present because of other existing deeds. However, as social beings, we make conscious decisions despite the influences surrounding us. Though I may have had a bad experience with an apple before, I had the freedom to choose a banana because of that experience. These occurrences guide us, but they do not eliminate our ability to decide, our rudimentary right, freedom. Influence may feel similar to control but they are not the same. Our experiences shape the lens we use to view the world, but they do not force us down one singular path. Whether it’s done through challenging expectations or overcoming fears, ordinary people make decisions that contradict the influences of others every day. If we let our past write the future, change would be impossible. Instead, our human ability to reflect on the past is what makes freedom a unique catalyst in each and every one of us.

For centuries, freedom has been a point of contention in numerous areas in the world. According to the World Population Review, Syria is currently the country with the lowest freedom index. This is due to the strict restrictions on expression citizens in the country deal with being in a political state defined by corruption and terrorism. This shows that freedom is more than just an idea—it is something that can be taken away.

Take the example of Yaser, a father of five in Syria who has had to cease his children’s participation at school. He was forced to trek through the war-torn nation in an attempt to shelter his children in which he was eventually able to flee the country. Yaser’s circumstances also show that freedom is not just the absence of restrictions. Without restrictions, life would be a meaningless set of choices compounded upon one another. Though many of his and his children’s rights have been taken away, he still makes difficult choices for his family. He chooses, and decides, and fights against the limitations of war, his actions have meaning. His escaping of Syria proves responsibility is present despite the numerous possible constraints on freedom.

When I was in 5th grade, our class was assigned a geometry project where we were to create a city with different shapes. The city's layout could be based on anything we chose. My classmates delved into ideas such as food, geology, and even languages. Unfortunately, I immaturity chose the human body, which my 11-year-old self thought was an excellent idea. Areas like "Arm Avenue", "Brain Boulevard", and "Spine Street" were clever implementations of parts of the body in a city. However, my own naive mind had chosen to throw all of my responsibility out as I wrote the words, "Poop Parking" and "Pee Place". These comical additions caught the attention of my classmates as they would giggle and laugh attempting to recreate my humor in their own projects. This spread eventually caught the attention of my teacher who described my actions as "inappropriate". After ridicule from both my parents and my teacher, I was shaken by how a seemingly minor bunch of words resulted in such embarrassing consequences. As I ashamedly erased the words off my paper, I had learned that my freedom has bounds, and the unlimited state of freedom is dangerous.

Revisiting that experience has led me to now realize a couple things. When this occurred, I felt betrayed, as if my favorite teacher had taken back on her promise. However, I have now realized she never intended to restrain my creativity. She trusted us to use our freedom in a clever and thoughtful way, but I mistook the ability to do anything for the freedom to ignore the consequences. Thinking about it now has taught me that freedom doesn't diminish responsibility; responsibility allows freedom to exist without harm. Without responsibility, our world would be chaos.

Ever since the end of school in June, my discussion with Bob has been in the back of my mind. When brainstorming for this prompt, its resurgence has allowed me to understand something neither of us considered. Freedom is a fundamental right, but with that, each of our free decisions influence those around us, creating a sense of responsibility. As Roy T. Bennett writes in *The Light in the Heart*, "Every choice comes with a consequence. Once you make a choice, you must accept responsibility. You cannot escape the consequences of your choices, whether you like them or not." This statement emphasizes that decisions made create the web of choices mentioned in Bob's argument. However, the web doesn't remove, limit, or cease the existence of our freedom, it creates a sense of responsibility to make decisions aligned with our own values.

As Uncle Ben famously tells Peter Parker in *Spider-Man*, "With great power comes great responsibility". Freedom, like power, comes with the responsibility for consequences that follow. So yes, freedom is a fundamental right we all have. Whether we are deciding between an apple and a banana, working on a school project, or making life-altering decisions amidst immense hardship, our choices shape not only our lives, but those around us as well. Freedom is like the apple. Like an apple falling, our actions fly free. But only when we recognize there are consequences to our actions, will we truly appreciate the meaning of freedom. Because freedom isn't just letting the apple fall. It's also picking it off the ground.