

The Biggest Questions in Life – Part 2: Are People Fundamentally Good? Do We Have Freewill?

Here are two more of the biggest questions in our lives.

Are people fundamentally good? This question actually creates one of the dividing lines in Western culture. Many believe that people are fundamentally good, and with the proper education, nurture, and governmental and societal programs, the majority of people will become respectable citizens. Consider the violent criminal. There is always an argument that if the criminal was raised by wealthier parents, and received a better education, his fate would be altered. Increasingly, such criminals are actually considered the “victims” of a culture that failed them.

Money is a key component of this argument. More government money for social programs is considered to be progressive and helpful. Experts contend that because poverty is the root cause of crime, the poor commit more crimes than the wealthy.

Others believe that sometimes no matter what we do for some people, the result will be the same. No government program, education, family, or friends can prevent someone from doing something evil if they are determined to do it. True, poverty and culture play a significant role in people’s behavior. But even in the most broken cultures we still find people who are good, and in predominantly positive environments some people still turn out rotten. Personal values and morals are considered more important than government assistance.

Another big question is: Do we have freewill? Are humans like animals, reacting through instinct? Or are we able to make our own unique decisions?

Science places humans in the Animal Kingdom. Americans reinforce that classification every Black Friday after Thanksgiving, when herds of humans stampede discount stores, aggressively seeking bargains like vultures seeking roadkill. All you can eat buffets confirm our place in the Animal Kingdom.

Freewill is difficult to assess. There is the religious belief that everything that happens to us is the result of Providence – or the hand of God. If true, that would invalidate freewill, since we would be nothing more than puppets manipulated by God.

If science is correct, then everything we do is through instinct rather than cognitive decision. No one tells the geese which way to

fly, or a mare how to care for her newborn foal. Animals seem to know through instinct.

Both of the questions above have been transformed in recent decades with the rise in our understanding of genetics.

Perhaps when we arrive at a crossroad in our lives, we believe that we are making our own decision. Instead, it's the neurons in our brain that actually assess the potential of each path, and makes the decision for us. Many of us even act according to other's expectations or societal pressures. We behave a certain way because of our family, friends, or coworkers. Think how someone will get a tattoo to display their individualism, yet their friends all have tattoos. Is that free will or conformity?

Let's return to the argument of poverty and violence. The perpetrator could argue that he was simply a victim of his environment. He really did not have the freewill to act any other way.

He could also argue that he possesses a genetic disposition to violence. There is already talk about a Violence Gene. If such a gene exists, and the offender was raised in terrible conditions, then he did not possess the freewill to be "good" or "bad." It was decided for him. In such a scenario, genes and environment trump freewill.

However, there are also people in similar predicaments, and choose another course of action. In every violent protest, there are always more people who march peaceably, demonstrating that even under chaotic conditions, humans can act civil if they choose.

Is it genetics, the environment, or an acquired sense of morality that make people good? I do not believe we will ever achieve the perfect formula, since human beings cannot achieve perfection.

Yet, society is clearly moving away from notions of personal responsibility in favor of genetics and environment. I believe this will only have deleterious effects on our society. Human beings are clearly capable of choosing to be good even when everyone around them is bad.

It's what separates us from the animals. Even at a buffet on Black Friday.

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