

# Do We Have Free Will?

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**M**y name is Baoyue Zhang. People usually call me “Coco.” I am seventeen years old, and I am currently a Junior in The Hun School of Princeton. I came from Shanghai, China, but right now I live in Princeton, New Jersey, in the US.

Recently, a movie came out called “Don’t Look Up.” It describes the story of an astronomy professor, Randall Mindy, who along with his student, Kate, discover an existential comet crisis, and depicts the struggle they faced when they were trying to inform the public about the crisis.

Beside the criticism of the government corruption and allusion to the global warming crisis, I have noticed one idea behind the story which is freedom and free will. Freedom is a central theme for the United States, as we could

pecially for Professor Randall Mindy. From the start, he was the person who noticed the comet and tried to inform everyone. However, due to multiple circumstances, he seems to be pushed to be part of the corrupt government system that he hated at first as well. This situation does not seem uncommon, it happens in real life multiple times. That became a question for me, “Do we really have the freedom to choose our life and choose the person we want to become, or does it mean everyone’s life is just part of ‘inescapable fate?’”

I consider the answer that the movie provides to me is a “NO.” In the movie, there is a character who is a billionaire that seems to be able to dominate everything with wealth, including the missile launch project of the US government. Everyone, including the president, follows his orders. At the start, he used his money to create a machine, which implemented the theory of Laplace’s Demon in real life. Laplace’s theory is that after knowing the location and direction of all the atoms in the world, people would be able to predict the future. In the movie, with the machine’s large database, it is able to predict how a person will die. For the whole movie, it only mentioned two predictions. For the first one, it is about the death of the president, in which she will be killed by an unknown creature. That actually became the reality for her by the end of the story. The other prediction is for Professor Murphy; the prediction said that he will die alone. However, that did not become the reality because he died with the accompaniment of family and friends. In the story, he was really close with this so-called “fate,” but maybe because of this acknowledgement, he finally

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see from the natural right in the Declaration of Independence and the protection of freedom in the First Amendment. Freedom is a significant part of people’s lives no matter if it is political freedom or freedom in general. As we can see from the story, a lot of those characters just seem to be placed in an involuntary state, es-

decided to give up the opportunity to get on the “Noah’s Ark,” and decided to return to his family. That decision made him escape from “fate.” That is the reason why I consider the movie’s perspective to be more inclined with existentialism, especially its idea of radical freedom.

I was shocked when I learned existentialism theory at first because common sense tells us that freedom is what most people pursue, but in this theory, people are afraid of freedom. Since with unlimited freedom, there is nothing that could be determined. This uncertainty stops people from knowing the meaning of life. To avoid it, people tend to fall into bad faith, where people reject other options and consider what they are doing is the only option, by doing so they could provide a certainty for themselves. However, there is always radical freedom, in which they could choose to do other things at any time. It is just like the conversation between Professor Murphy and Dr. Teddy Oglethorpe, the head of the Planetary Defense Coordination Office. When Murphy considered he was forced to do all those things and be part of this political act, Dr. Teddy Oglethorpe said to him, “Man always has choices!”

I did not really focus on existentialism in the past since determinism, the theory that everything is predictable, seems to follow basic causal logic. However, after I finished the movie and after I got a deeper understanding of existentialism, that totally shifted my perspective toward life. In every event that I participated in, rather than think that I was forced to be there, I now know that I subjectively chose to be there. I was not being forced to act good in every subject, but I chose it because of multiple factors, like I want to get good grades and I want to learn new things. This is not enjoyable since it constantly leads you to make decisions independently and have no other reasons to blame. But it pushed me to make careful decisions and take responsibility for the decision. I hope everyone can acknowledge that they do have a choice to pursue the thing they genuinely want, and of course there is cost along with every decision. ■

#### Endnote

Crowell, Steven. 2020. “Existentialism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/existentialism>.

**DON'T  
LOOK  
UP**

