Marco's Experiment

Sam pushed open the heavy door of George's restaurant, briefly musing on how the weight seemed to symbolize the gradual loss of strength that comes with aging. As he stepped inside, he spotted Marco, his best friend of many years, sitting at their usual table. Despite their age difference of about twenty years, Sam and Marco had forged a deep bond, beginning at a Men's Retreat Weekend hosted by Robert Glover years ago. Marco looked up, noticed Sam, and waved him over with a warm smile.

"Hey, young buck," Sam said with a grin as he settled into the seat across from Marco. "How's life in the fast-paced world of software engineering?"

Marco chuckled at the familiar greeting. "Hey, old timer. It's going well. MedTech is keeping me on my toes, as usual. How about you? Still contemplating the mysteries of the universe?"

"You know me," Sam replied, his eyes twinkling. "Can't help but ponder the big questions. Speaking of which, I enjoyed our discussion last week about free will."

Marco nodded, his expression turning thoughtful. "I enjoyed it too, Sam. But I have to tell you, I'm not entirely convinced."

"I'd be surprised if you were," Sam chuckled. "It's a very difficult concept to wrap our heads around. And I've often wondered why people have such a strong, negative reaction when I bring up the topic."

"Yeah, I've noticed that too," Marco agreed. "It's like touching a raw nerve for some people. Why do you think that is?"

Sam leaned back, considering. "I think it has to do with a person's identity. In other words, their sense of who they are."

"And how does that relate to free will?" Marco asked, genuinely curious.

"Well, think about it this way," Sam began. "Almost as soon as we're born, our parents and others start to tell us, in one way or another, who we are. You're a 'good baby' as they coo and smile at you. And that conditioning continues through childhood."

Marco nodded, "Yeah, I can see that. Like when parents say, 'You're such a smart boy' or 'You're mommy's little helper.'"

"Exactly!" Sam exclaimed. "And it doesn't stop there. Remember when you were in school and got a good grade? What did the teacher say?"

Marco grinned, "Oh, something like, 'Great job, Marco! You're so talented at math.'"

"Right," Sam continued. "And what about when you didn't do so well?"

Marco's grin faded slightly. "Well, then it was more like, 'You need to apply yourself more, Marco. You're not living up to your potential.'"

"See?" Sam said, leaning forward. "It's all about shaping our identity. And it doesn't stop in childhood. Think about your first job interview."

Marco laughed. "Oh man, I remember being told I had 'leadership potential' and was a 'team player.' I barely knew what those meant at the time."

"But you internalized it, didn't you?" Sam pressed. "You started to see yourself that way."

"I guess I did," Marco admitted. "And now that I think about it, I catch myself doing the same thing. Like when I nail a presentation at work, I think, 'That's just who I am. I'm good at this.'"

Sam nodded enthusiastically. "Exactly! And what about when things don't go well?"

Marco thought for a moment. "Well, if I bomb a presentation, I'm more likely to blame external factors. Like, 'The client was in a bad mood' or 'The projector wasn't working right.'"

"Bingo!" Sam exclaimed. "That's the crux of it. We internalize the good and externalize the bad. It's a form of self-preservation, I think."

Their conversation paused as Jason, their friend and server, approached with a pot of coffee. After exchanging pleasantries and placing their usual orders—a Keto plate for Sam and country-fried steak for Marco—they returned to their discussion.

"So, where were we?" Sam asked, stirring his coffee idly.

"We were talking about how we internalize the good and externalize the bad," Marco reminded him. "But how does this tie back to free will?"

Sam took a sip of his coffee before responding. "Well, think about it. If we believe that all our good qualities and successes are purely the result of our own choices and efforts, what does that imply?"

Marco's eyes widened with realization. "That we have free will. That we're in control of our actions and their outcomes."

"Exactly," Sam nodded. "And if we believe that, then any suggestion that we don't have free will feels like. . . "

"An attack on our very identity," Marco finished. "Wow, I never thought of it that way before."

"It goes even deeper," Sam continued. "As we grow older, we start to reinforce this conditioning ourselves. We set goals, make plans, and congratulate ourselves when we achieve them. We tell ourselves, 'I did this. I made this happen.'"

Marco nodded thoughtfully. "And I suppose when we fail to meet our goals, we're more likely to blame circumstances. 'I didn't have enough time' or 'The market conditions weren't right.'"

"Precisely," Sam agreed. "It's a self-reinforcing cycle. And it makes it very difficult for people to even consider the idea that free will might be an illusion."

As their food arrived, Sam continued, "You know, Marco, I've been a student of this topic for many years now. I've developed a lay understanding of neuroscience, and I find the work of Robert Sapolsky, the professor emeritus from Stanford, particularly fascinating."

Marco looked intrigued. "Sapolsky? I don't think I'm familiar with his work."

"Oh, he's brilliant," Sam enthused. "He recently published a book called 'Determined' that really dives into these issues. It's a comprehensive look at how our behavior is shaped by factors beyond our conscious control."

"That sounds interesting," Marco said, jotting down the title on his phone. "I'll have to look it up. Any videos of his talks on YouTube?"

Sam nodded eagerly. "Absolutely. Sapolsky is a fantastic speaker. His lectures are engaging and often quite funny. You should definitely check them out."

"I will," Marco promised. "Anyone else you'd recommend on this topic?"

"Well, I'm also a fan of Sam Harris's work," Sam replied. "Particularly his book on free will from around 2012. Harris comes at it from both a neuroscientific and philosophical perspective."

Marco whistled low. "Sounds like you've really done your homework on this, Sam. It reminds me of how we've both worked on ourselves since that first Men's Retreat Weekend. Always learning, always growing."

Sam smiled, remembering their shared journey. "That's right. We've come a long way from being 'Mr. Nice Guys,' haven't we?"

"We sure have," Marco agreed. "And speaking of growth, I've been thinking about how I could apply some of these ideas to my work at MedTech."

Sam leaned forward, intrigued. "Oh? What did you have in mind?"

"Well," Marco began, "what if I did an informal study of my software engineering team? Looking at how these ideas about free will and determinism might affect our team dynamics and productivity."

Sam's eyes lit up. "That's a fantastic idea, Marco! What kind of things would you look at?"

Marco leaned forward, excited now. "Well, for starters, I could observe how team members attribute successes and failures. Are they internalizing the good outcomes and externalizing the bad, like we discussed earlier?"

"Excellent," Sam nodded. "What else?"

"I could also look at how our reward systems and performance reviews might be reinforcing certain beliefs about agency and responsibility," Marco continued.

"And maybe explore how a deeper understanding of these concepts could lead to more effective and empathetic management practices."

Sam was grinning now. "Marco, I think you're onto something big here. This could potentially revolutionize how we approach software engineering and help our colleagues get more satisfaction from their work."

Marco nodded, his food momentarily forgotten as ideas raced through his mind. "Exactly! If we can help people understand that their successes and failures aren't solely the result of their individual choices, but part of a complex web of factors, it might reduce stress and increase empathy in the workplace."

"And potentially lead to more collaborative and supportive team environments," Sam added. "It's a far cry from the 'nice guy' mindset we used to have, where we might have avoided conflict or tried to please everyone at our own expense."

"Right," Marco agreed. "Instead of fostering a cutthroat, individualistic culture, or being passive and conflict-avoidant, we could create an atmosphere where people understand that we're all influenced by factors beyond our control, and that success is a collective endeavor."

Sam sat back, looking impressed. "Marco, my friend, I think the ideas we've been discussing here could indeed be incredibly helpful in that work. You're applying these philosophical concepts to real-world situations in a way that could have tangible benefits."

Marco smiled, picking up his fork again. "Thanks, Sam. I'm excited to explore this further. Maybe next time we meet, I'll have some initial observations to share."

"I'm looking forward to it already," Sam said, raising his coffee cup in a toast. "Here's to free will, determinism, and better software engineering practices!"

Marco laughed, clinking his glass against Sam's cup. "Cheers to that, old timer!"

As they finished their meal, both friends felt energized by the conversation and the potential applications of these complex ideas to everyday life and work. They knew that this was just the beginning of a long and fruitful exploration, another chapter in their enduring friendship and personal growth journey.