

Who Are Free, Who Are Not Free – Two Conceptions of Autonomy

Introduction

Herbert Marcuse said that universal toleration can be administered as a way of manipulation. He assumes the person being manipulated is not autonomous. However, autonomy itself is a dubious concept. We human being are the result of a long time conditioning of external stimuli on ourselves (despite some universal “transcendental” qualities presupposed by all humans.) If autonomy itself is drawn into question, then Marcuse’s accusation of heteronomy is dubious.

However, the idea that autonomy does not exist is revisionary, i.e. it is contrary to common sense. This essay is going to attempt to preserve the idea of autonomy with a different conception than the commonly held “**could have done otherwise**” conception of freedom. The essay is going to employ the definition provided by Harry Frankfurt in his essays on freedom and determinism and explore its practical boundaries of free and unfree in the case of the “indoctrination of principle of tolerance.”

Analysis

Herbert Marcuse’s sentence can be broken down into its constituent arguments. Before we start this process, we should notice that Marcuse used the word “heteronomy” and “autonomy.” Autonomy means acting from one’s own means. Heteronomy, likewise, means acting not from one’s own means. I used the word “means” for its vagueness. The distinction of these two words will be analyzed later. Nonetheless, these two terms, in most circumstances, can be used interchangeably with “free” and “not free.”

Claims:

1. Tolerance can be administered to individual.
 2. Some individuals (the set of which, hereafter, A) are administered to tolerance.
 3. Within the population of A, some also parrot the opinion of their masters (hereafter, this subset of A is referred to as B.)
 4. The set of A is the same set as the set of B.
 5. B’s autonomy stems from heteronomy
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Among these statements, it should come to our notice that claim 4 is not apparently stated by Marcuse. Instead, it was assumed when he speaks of “manipulated and indoctrinated individuals who parrot, as their own, the opinion of their masters,” that any individual who are indoctrinated with tolerance will also parrot the opinions of others. However, this assumption is unwarranted. It can entirely be the case that a person is indoctrinated with tolerance but go on to have “opinion of their own.” This part will be argued in details later.

A few of the claims can be first granted as true. Almost all will agree that claim one and two are true. It should come to our notice that the word used by Marcuse - “administer” - is largely a factual word. In some circumstances, this word can be replaced by words like “manipulation”, “education”, “indoctrination”, or “preaching.” In their nature, administering and manipulating is similar, for they are all just influencing. These two words has a difference only in rhetoric. For its neutrality, “administer” describes only the process of a naïve mind being planted with the idea of tolerance, but not how this process is right or wrong. We define this process of being administered to tolerance by discriminating only two qualities:

First, the individual being administered to does not know tolerance at the start, but claims to know it after. Second, the individual would not have gained tolerance without being exposed to a certain thought by other people during the process.

If so defined, as will be seen later, the population of A is as large as the set of all individuals who have the quality of tolerance. This will be addressed later.

Then, with statement 1 and 2 granted as true. Only 3, 4 and 5 need our attention.

Why All Tolerant People Are “Administered” to Tolerance

The literature in why determinism is true is already rich. This essay, however, will try to point out the fundamental reason why we are all administered to tolerance (if granted my definition.) In short, it can be argued that it is because we are born as a Lockean whiteboard. Because when we are born, none of us have the quality of tolerance. One might argue that tolerance is a part of human nature. However, this claim is largely due to confusion of inaction as tolerance. One might observe a child not being able to respond to a person punching it (thus, inaction), but it does not equal to being tolerant. The virtue of tolerance requires the person “being able to ease the anger caused by the thing with benevolence.” And with this insight, it is revealed that the child does not have belief of the sort that can erase the anger from its heart.

The concept of a Lockean Tabula Rasa is subject to criticism. Just as Noam Chomsky has said that we are also born with some internal rules governing our thought and speech, Gestalt psychology has also pointed out even infants has certain engrained disposition which leads them to prefer certain kind of form than others. However, these should not concern our claim that no one is born with tolerance, because none of this disposition has the quality of “being able to ease the anger caused by the thing with benevolence.”

If our mind is only equipped with certain dispositions when born, then all the other qualities that the mind equip itself with later in its life are all external, external in the sense that they are due to the perception of stimuli, whose source is certainly not from the person himself. If so, then we have fulfilled our definition of being administered to tolerance. Originally, no one has tolerance. And then, some of them have it. All of A’s mind experience the process of adding “tolerance” as a part of it, and this part clearly is due to external stimuli, and no one has the capacity in choosing what stimuli to receive.

However, even this bundle of predispositions are not our voluntary choice in any sense. When a thing starts to exist, it does not start to exist as an empty clothe hanger waiting for predicates. In fact, it start with being a member of a certain type. When we human beings start to “be”, we “be” as a member of the human race. It does not make sense for us to inquire whether the person choose to receive our bundle of predispositions (hereafter, “bundle”) or not, because a person always come with this bundle. It is certainly not volunarily chosen by any person, because no one exists prior to having this bundle. If we follow the idea of freedom as “could have done otherwise,” then the process of acquiring this original bundle is not free.

According to this definition of freedom, being “administered” to a certain belief certainly means did not voluntarily choose it. However, it should be realized that our incompetence in choosing for our own stems from the moment of birth. No one ask anyone to be born. When born, all the rest follows suit. The problem lies in the fact that no one has the ability to choose prior to existence. After “having the bundle”, any addition of our mind comes from the external world, our perception of

which is conditioned by the involuntary bundle. Prior to “having the bundle”, we simply do not exist. Thus, not even any single step in the whole process of becoming a person is “free”.

To reformulate my argument:

1. The process of acquiring “the bundle” is not voluntary.
 2. After birth, all the other addition made to our mind are conditioning of external stimuli with the “bundle”.
 3. We are not voluntary in choosing what stimuli to perceive.
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Conclusion: We are not voluntary in any stage of our life.

Ramifications of the Classical Conception of Freedom inside Marcuse’s argument

We have proven that, none of us is free in the traditional sense of the word. Thus, it does not really matter whether the person is parroting its master’s words (i.e. value system) anyway. Because receiving the value system from books, education, or parents are equivalent to receiving words from the master in the sense that they are all involuntary external stimuli. It really does not make sense for us to distinguish the set of A from the set of B given this definition of freedom. One can even say that a person is always receiving dictates from a “cultural dictator.” They come in colorful packages of Hollywood movies and social media. Apparently, this idea of freedom as voluntarily choosing fails to capture Marcuse’s argument. It renders everyone a slave to external stimuli, whereas from common sense, we know that some people are more free than others.

In this definition of freedom, Marcuse’s claim is wrong because there is no such a thing as autonomy.

There is only one way left to leave this mirage of being unfree, to adopt a different idea of freedom.

Exposition of a Different Kind of Freedom

Desires can be distinguished into different orders. There are first order desires such as hunger, fear of death, anger, and the lust of membership. Scientifically speaking, the extension of the term “first order desire” roughly equates with all the desire stemming from the limbic part of the brain. They are more rudimentary and “culturally unrefined”. To formulate it in language, it is “I wish to do X.”

There are second order desires. Harry Frankfurt’s definition might be different from mine, but in practice, its extension roughly equates with all the desires stemming from the “value system” of the individual. Biologically speaking, they come from the Neocortex, especially the Frontal Lobe. Kant might call these second order desires “dictate of reasons.” To formulate it in language, it is “I wish I wish to do Y.(possibly, instead of X)”

There can even be third order desires. They are preference of one value system over the other. To use an example used by Frankfurt, a southern gentry from the 19th century might have a second order desire of being surly and racist toward a slave. However, he also has a different value system that create another second order desire aiming to be friendly toward the slave. His preference of the second system to the first is his third order desire. To formulate it in language, it is “I wish to believe in Y.(possibly, instead of X)”

Usually, when one has a higher order desire, one also has a lower order desire of the same kind. Then, the will is the sum of all desires (the case of aversion is regarded as a negative desire.) Harry Frankfurt considers the case of a “wanton,” which is a person who has a higher order desire but not a lower order one. However, this shall not concern us in the application of “orders of desire” in determining whether a person is free.

Then, **a person is free when he or she is acting from second order desire instead of a first order one**. An animal is not free because they do not wish to wish something different, a normal person is partially free because sometimes he or she is still controlled by anger instead of benevolence, and a Nietzschean ubermensch is absolutely free because his second order desires are so strong that none of the first order desire is comparable to their power. To consider one example, we might want to investigate in the case of tolerance.

Tom is punched by me. Naturally, my punch generates an anger in his heart because Tom is also an animal, and an animal's brain is programmed to be angry in the case of being punched. Now, anger is just an emotion, but it is capable of generating a first order desire of punching me. However, Tom is taught to be tolerant with other people. Tom has the second order desire of benevolence. His benevolence generates a strong first order desire of not punching me back. This first order desire turns out to be stronger. Thus, Tom's effective will is to remain tolerant about my punch.

Application of “Orders of Desires” Theory to Marcuse's Case

Recalling from the analysis part of the essay, set of all people who parrot their master's opinion are called B. Retaining our previous definition of “administered” to, we are still right in saying that the set of A (people who are administered to tolerant) is same as people who are tolerant. Marcuse also used the word “manipulated” and “indoctrinated” to describe this group of people. However, these two words in their essence is the same as “administered,” but only with a shade of rhetoric.

Among the set of A is the set of B. Parroting another person's opinion requires definition. In one sense of the word, we can just capture the nature of parroting, which is to mimic something else. If Tom does manage to mimic the second order desire of his teacher, then Tom is still free. In this case, Tom has autonomy. It makes none but rhetoric sense for Marcuse to say that “heteronomy has become autonomy.” Tom is clearly acting from a second order desire. If heteronomy means **acting from another person's will**, i.e. being influenced by another person's will, all of the external stimuli we receive are conditioned by other people's will. The concept of heteronomy presupposes that there is no autonomy. Heteronomy presupposes that acting from another person's will is unfree, and that is just about the classical definition of freedom. If Marcuse were to follow this definition of freedom, then autonomy does not exist and it does not make sense for him to say that “heteronomy has become autonomy.” The word autonomy makes sense in the orders of desires definition, whereas heteronomy makes sense only in the classical definition of freedom. These two terms are exclusive. Using one definition of freedom will invalidate the other. There is one escape, it is to not make heteronomy presuppose no freedom, whereas in this case the word heteronomy has lost its weight.

However, one might want to use a different definition of parroting. We might want to capture the nature of not just parroting, but also the parrot. The parrot has only first order desires, while some human may largely only first order desires too. Then, how can a person be “indoctrinated with tolerance” when he or she does not have second order desire of being tolerant? The answer naturally lies in some first order desires shared by all humans. There is one particular dominant first order desire, it is the lust for membership. Tom might not have the capacity to develop a value system of his own, but he still can choose to follow suit. He might see other people around him who does act of compassion and thus get the praise of other human beings. If so, his mind can easily be conditioned in

such manner that he is prone to do what other people considers to be tolerant. I am frequently amazed by how most colleges in United States are so predominantly liberal. To be sure, some of the people in these university are not actually liberal. Rather, it is the dominant atmosphere of being liberal that unconsciously conditioned them to be acting in such manner. When punched by me, Tom has one natural first order desire of punching me back. However, another desire he has is his fear of loss of respect, and that generates another first order desire which coneracts with his desire of punching me.

Of course, there are different individuals who fuffill different standards of parroting. For the sake of convenience, we can classify those who does not have the second order desire of tolerance into the set of C, which is a subset of B. Those who parrot, but also integrate tolerance into their own cognitive framework, are a member of A and B. If we were to retain the characteristic of manipulation, we might want to say that the person is not free when he or she is manipulated with tolerance. However, the only way a person can be unfree is to act from first order desire. And that means they are a member of C instead of B. Marcuse's claim runs into trouble because there is no "heteronomy become autonomy" in this case either, because there is no autonomy.

I understand that this definition of freedom also puts many important human natural qualities, such as compassion, in jeopardy. Tom might be a villain. He has second order desire of getting rich at the advantage of other people. However, a man in rags stole one 10 Euro bill from Tom. Nontheless, seeing his grave poverty, Tom did not chase after him. In this case, Tom has not really gone through his mind about his desire to be rich, his naturally ingrained compassion is already strong enough to check his anger. Shall we say that Tom is not free when acting as such? I believe so. Virtue ethicists talk about the idea of "moral wisdom." It is said that being kind is not enough. Rather, the wise man knows when to give and when to restrain himself(which is second order.) A compassionate individual might indeed be a parrot who is only acting from its animal nature.

Conclusion

Marcuse's claim is not fully valid. Trying to validate a part of it will make the rest invalid. If the person has autonomy, then there really isn't any heteronomy, vice versa. However, the factual part of his claim that universal toleration can lose its rationale is examined and shown to be correct. People loses their rationale, and thus freedom, when acting from first order desires.