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To be Free or Not to Be Free

The Declaration of the Rights of Man, written in 1789, defines liberty as “the freedom to do everything which injures no one else,” a definition which already places a limitation on the expression of individual freedom. While human freedom today is often thought of as simply pure individuality or will, this definition adds another dynamic that is essential in understanding the way human beings express their individual freedoms. It is impossible to exist in society without being influenced by the environment or individuals around you. Human beings are inherently social, born into a world with six billion others with which to interact and learn, so defining freedom simply in terms of the individual is incomplete. Everything from language to the meaning of closing one eye (winking) is instilled in the individual by society. This influence extends to the realm of human freedoms. As demonstrated in the theories of Emile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, and Michel Foucault, human freedoms are awarded to the individual through society so that such rights can be exercised within the framework of society’s regulations, ultimately resulting in a self-regulation. Thus, society both gives and limits our freedoms, portraying human freedom as articulated in the terms of society and its rules.

A well-known quote from Emile Durkheim articulates the idea of humans as inherently social being, which serves as the foundation for this essay. Durkheim simply states that “man is double” (1929:29). A human being is an individual and a member of a society. This equates to a dual purpose of man and a splicing of duties to himself as an individual and to society as a whole, those of which he must learn through socialization. However, as Durkheim elaborates, it

becomes clear that this divide is not really a divide at all, but a give and take between the two. In another essay, Durkheim explains how “the religion of the individual is a social institution... which assigns us this ideal as a sole common end” (1898:70). Essentially, Durkheim is asserting that, if the state gives man freedom (to vote, to speak, to write), it must be to serve a greater purpose, not only the individual. The individual is meant to use these rights for the betterment of society, which is limiting in and of itself. In this way, freedom is collectively given to the individual, as long as they are expressed in ways deemed acceptable by society. Thus, the individual’s duty to society is made more salient than their duties to themselves.

Durkheim’s analysis of religion illustrates a way in which human beings are given freedoms through society in order to cater to its greater needs. In the essay, religion is defined as a unified system of beliefs and practices where human beings can believe and practice together (1929). This fosters a sense of community between individuals and a collective effervescence which ultimately causes group actions to have a greater impression upon them than individual actions. An individual begins to see themselves in terms of how they fit into society. For example, when the Arunta practice imitative rites together, they feed off the energy of seeing others performing the same actions based on the same beliefs as themselves. They thrive off that acquired sense of community and collaboration and see how their use of freedoms and rights affects society as a whole. Having conflicting beliefs or refusing to participate in rites and rituals results in exclusion and comes off as a moral affront to society. This compels individuals to act within the constraints of society as opposed to outside of it, demonstrating the limitations society puts on individual freedom. Yet, individuals still feel as if their actions or decisions to participate are impactful on a larger scale, serving as individual validation as well. Thus, it becomes clear

that regardless of how human freedom is interpreted, society has an unmistakable influence on the way in which individuals exercise their freedoms.

Sigmund Freud provides compelling evidence regarding the human unconscious that illustrates the way in which individuality ultimately works with society as opposed to against it. Freud's theory claims that human beings are driven by unconscious motivations, not socialization as Durkheim argues.. The key word being "unconscious," indicating that we are unaware that such motivations exist. In fact, the only way of knowing that there is this bubbling river of motivation inside the human mind is through "Freudian slips," which indicate the expression of feelings or thoughts that were otherwise repressed into your unconscious. This connection with the layer of the mental process we are otherwise unaware of is tangible evidence that we as individuals are constantly fighting back primordial urges which Freud dubs the "id." Given that the majority of the time our superego, or socially-acquired part of the mind, is in control, we are consistently exercising our freedom to act separately from our own animal urges. But the superego was instilled in us by society not only as a way for individuals to exercise some modicum of personal freedom, but also to better society by enticing individuals to repress urges that would ultimately harm the progression of society. Freud cites incest and murder (i.e "the Oedipus Complex) as an example of the nature of the id's urges. If such desires were truly "free" to be expressed, civilized society would crumble. Thus, the superego, or society, is structured in a way that allows freedom of repression, but only because it serves the betterment of society, illustrating a way in which individual freedoms are limited.

This notion of society affording individual freedoms for its own benefit is taken even further with Freud's discussion of infantile sexuality and the role of the family. Essentially, this process acts as a way for family interactions to groom the individual into a productive member of

society. Over the course of a child's life, they progress from beings incapable of doing anything unrelated to pursuing "individual organ-pleasure" to someone who is "normal" or healthy" (1920). Infants are perverse, Freud asserts, but as they grow up, the child learns to detach himself from his parents. But it is "not until that task is achieved can he cease to be a child and become a member of the social community" (1920:337). This notion directly links repression of individual "perversions" with exclusion from the great social community. A child can only be a member of society once she has learned to dominate the omnipresent urge to seek bodily pleasure. Freud notes that "[p]eople who are normal today have passed along a path of development that has led through the perversions and object-cathexes of the Oedipus complex," suggesting that those who are not normal have a weakness that allows them to continue to be dominated by their subconscious urges (1920:338). Thus, a normal, healthy individual is given the freedom to successfully reconcile the urges of the id with the regulations of the superego, but with the goal of obeying norms and fitting into to society rather than simply the expressing human freedoms.

What has been discussed thus far can be construed as a negative portrayal of the power society holds over the individual and her freedoms. Michel Foucault's discussion of power, however, supports the notion regarding individual freedoms operating within the confines of social structure with a productive spin. Foucault offers that society's power in this situation is productive in that it produces subjects or types of people. In the case of Freud, the way in which he describes the suppression of the id by the superego can be construed as society repressing individual urges and desires. However, Foucault pushes beyond such a definition with "a kind of analysis that allows one to go beyond...the concepts of ideology and repression" (2001:520). He argues that if power is wholly negative, no one would successfully be brought to obey it. Yet,

human beings find themselves wanting to control the animalistic desires of their ids or participate in imitative rites in order to obey the power of the superego because such power “traverses and produces things” such as habits and desires (2001:521). These habits and desires, are they ways in which society gives human beings individual freedoms so that their power is exercised in a productive way. Ultimately, Foucault argues that the inherent power of society as a regulating being has a productive effect on the individual, instilling in each citizen habits and desires that are beneficial to society.

Returning to the examples of Durkheim and Freud and how each author analyzes society’s interaction with the individual provides concrete evidence of Foucault’s argument. The macroscale level of these interactions details individual is adhering to social regulations and norms by exercising their will and freedoms. When Durkheim describes the collaborative energy present during an Arunta imitative rite, he is illustrating the productive power of society. Collectively, the Arunta believe that imitating “the different attitudes and aspects of the animal whose reproduction is desired,” will in fact result in an increased number of that species (1929:393). Participation in these imitative rites is not physically mandated, yet members of the tribe have desire instilled in them to participate. So while one member of the Arunta may lean more toward James Frazer’s assessment of the situation as a “misapplications of principles of association,” he will inevitably choose to participate for fear of exclusion. This results in more members participating in the rites and, according to the Arunta, an increased success rate. Thus, society has power over the individual’s freedom of choice and desire, but in a way that serves the greater good.

To conclude the essay, Foucault’s analysis of Jeremy Bentham’s “Panopticon” illustrates the way in which society implores human beings to self-regulate using their will and

freedom (1977:200). While this concept was created in the 17th century to combat the plague in towns, this concept is widely applicable to society today. At its most basic, the Panopticon features a tall guard tower in the center of the town. The people below can never definitively know if anyone is present in the tower, but whomever is in the tower can see every citizen. Thus, it becomes beneficial for those being watched to always act as if there is someone looking down in order to avoid punishment, or the plague. This promotion of self-regulation is what this essay has been getting at. Human beings are given freedoms such as the right to obey the id or refuse to participate in an Arunta imitative ritual, but society's presence has ingrained the idea of self-regulation into the individual that they are compelled to use their freedoms for the benefit of society. Consequences of disobeying the id or not participating in ritual equate to legal repercussions or being ostracized by your tribe. This motivates individuals to work within the confines of society's regulation. However, this principle of self-regulation, as Foucault suggests, is not repressive. The only way in which every individual is guaranteed certain personal freedoms is through each individual using these freedoms within society's rules. Thus, because society gives and limits human freedoms, it is necessary for individuals to self-regulate their actions to ensure the proper functioning of society which will ultimately benefit the largest number of people.

There is a give and take between society and the individual that directly relates to the way in which human beings exercise their freedoms. While the individual must learn to navigate the complex interactions society inevitably brings using freedom of expression or action, society must also navigate the individual. The sheer number of human beings living on this Earth requires the regulation of each individual by a greater authority who ideally has the best interest of the greatest number of people in mind. However, as seen through Durkheim, Freud, and

Foucault, this is largely through self-regulation. Those individuals who are “normal” and “healthy” participate in self-regulation partially due to fear of being a pariah, but also because of the desire to exercise self-control and defeat the urges that have been deemed sub-human by Freud. An individual is liberated when taken out of context and viewed alone as the only living organism on the planet. But once it is clear that there are billions of other organisms, the individual is limited to the regulations of the omnipresent and ever-watching society.