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The World of the Free

Controversial topics; like abortion, biological engineering, and embryonic stem cell research; divide modern American society and beyond. It seems that, from all perspectives, people simply want to improve and maintain the best quality of life for the greatest majority. Instead of being focused on our well being, this dispute stems from a central question that has yet to be answered definitively: What is the definition of morality? Generally, morality is associated with a sense of what is “right” or “wrong,” and “[it] refers to the actions, dispositions, attitudes, virtues, and ways of life that should characterize the moral person and society...” (“Christian Ethics” 340). However, this sequence of associations is not equitable to a finite answer. Who establishes the moral standard? Is it the “moral person” (“Christian Ethics” 340)? Is it the government? Are they scientists? Is it God? Each of these branches of authority function within its own set of rules and regulations that help to define what it means for someone or something to be moral according to its standards.

Each of these influences have a major impact on the development of an individual. They have the ability to dictate how one processes information and can persuade one’s inner thoughts and reactions. A widespread assumption, if one has the ability to choose what one believes is right or wrong, one, therefore, has the freedom to do so, seems logical upon surface examination, but this assertion fails to address the critical question: Is a freedom to do something equivalent to an ability to do something? Answered bluntly, it is not.

Religious freedom is a natural right for American citizens, and it is has since been established and enforced by legislations around the globe. Having the freedom to choose

which religion (or none at all) to follow is a critical step in building the foundation of a person's character. Although having religious freedom seems to ensure freedom, it is evident that freedoms within the scope of an established religion are scarce. For example, it is taught from an early age that all Christians must worship God and their messiah, Jesus Christ, while living by certain criteria. They are conditioned to understand that "God's law determines what is right and wrong" ("Christian Ethics" 341); morality is defined for them. These expectations have been broadcasted since the dawn of Christianity's existence, as even "The scriptures point out that Christian believers are to live and act in certain ways" ("Christian Ethics" 340). Although Christians could, hypothetically, choose to live their lives outside of the guidelines set by their religion, they would be bombarded with an overwhelming guilt or backlash from the church; their choice would come at a cost.

This is similar to the cost paid by citizens of the New World society in Aldous Huxley's novel, *Brave New World*. Promiscuity is a societal norm in this dystopian society, therefore, monogamous relationships are seriously discouraged. When a central character, Lenina, finds herself happy while maintaining a consistent sexual relationship with a man, she is met with concern and is ridiculed by her friends and others. She, in this case, has no way to free herself from the situation because she must divert from what she wants in order to fit in (Huxley). Both Lenina and Christians face similar ridicule from their society as a cost of their individual desires, but they are limited when they choose to comply with normalities.

Reverting back to Christianity, even the original followers of Jesus were not free to live for themselves. Influenced by their Jewish origins, they worked "within that

framework” (“The History of Christianity” 348). Because of their upbringing, the apostles are not free to make unbiased decisions based on the information they are being faced with. By being presented with such expectations and limitations, Christians are not free and were never free within their religion, and they are the epitome of humanity’s central delusion: we are free to make our own decisions.

Society, even without the influence of religion, can be boxed in by standardized limitations. In *Brave New World*, citizens of the New World did not age, and the time of their death could not exceed roughly the age of 60. In this world, the government found this practice morally right even if people were not free to live out their lives in the way that they may have been born to do so. People were not given the chance to omit from these restraints, as they were coded in their genetic construction (Huxley).

This is reflective of reality’s fear of aging. According to the slightly outdated “disengagement theory”, elderly people remove themselves from their preoccupied social roles in order to maintain an equilibrium in society. Disengagement patterns were said to be “inevitable and universal” (“Disengagement” 504). This theory has since been proven to be unreliable because of a large amount of outliers, but it still manages to address pressures that are faced by elderly people as they age. It was later determined that, “disengagement of the elderly may have more to do with a lack of opportunity” (“Disengagement” 504). By limiting this demographic’s opportunities to engage, they are not completely free to live their lives in the ways they wish to do so because they face social consequences when pursuing their preferred path but are stifled when they choose to succumb to these pressures.

By diving deeper into the aforementioned topic of genetic engineering, one will realize that it is clear to see that this hot-topic raises some questions as to whether or not it is morally right for one to make drastic decisions for another human's life without their consent. While similar to the guidelines placed on the exemplary Christians and elderly demographic, this scenario explores a permanent, irreversible change. In Huxley's *Brave New World*, all citizens of the New World were made artificially in a lab. This means that each human to enter this society was made to fill a certain role, even sometimes a lower-level role in the hierarchies of society (Huxley).

Such extremes are what many pessimists fear may become a reality outside of the fictional world of Huxley. By reverting back to a religious perspective, one will encounter much resistance based on their foundational moral compass. Religious opposers generally agree upon a fear that, by genetically engineering human beings, humanity is abusing a "godlike ability of biotechnology" ("Cultural" 306). Concerns such as this are from a place of genuine concern, but if the world's scientists do, in fact, chose to restrain themselves from tapping into this new technology, the next generation of children may be deprived of genetic prosperity.

Adversely, if one were to ignore these concerns, who is to say that the extremes from Huxley's nightmare would be far from reach? In recent years, the worldview of the human body has shifted from a fixed entity, or a "Fordist body", to more individualistic and complex systems ("Cultural" 306). Overarching changes in view have made it easier for biotechnicians to morally justify their work, some going as far to recognize that "it's not voluntary for the children whose parents have made such irreversible choices for them"

("Tapson"), but they assert that "it's for their own good" ("Tapson"). Both opting out of the evolution of genetic engineering as well as partaking in it come at a cost as they limit the freedom of those involved, making it impossible for one to be confident in one's decision.

A permanent form of involuntary change that has already been visited and studied lies on the psychological plain. Classical conditioning, a process that relates a controlled stimulus to an uncontrolled stimulus in order to create the desired uncontrolled response, was originally discovered by Ivan Pavlov during his famous experiment that resulted in dogs salivating to the sound of a bell after being conditioned over time to associate the sound of a bell to the introduction of food. ("The Classical"). Dogs are a seemingly fine subject species, and the results of this particular experiment concluded with minimal/no damage, but does the same concept apply to people?

In *Brave New World*, the citizens of the new world are classically conditioned since their creation in order to ensure a stable society. They are conditioned to believe in their hierarchical social system, in promiscuity, and in other values that are promoted by their leadership. Although these methods are quite successful, people who experience such conditioning are unable to dissociate from the values that are instilled in them. (Huxley). Because of this inability to separate themselves from the values originally of others that have been pressed upon them, these people of the New World are not free to think independently.

A real-life example of how classical conditioning can affect people and their development is easily exemplified in the case of "Little Albert." Albert B. was a boy under a year old who was conditioned to develop a fear of rats by associating a loud noise with the

introduction of white rats. As the conditioning process progresses, his fear evolved into, not only a fear of rats, but a fear of all white, fuzzy objects. What happened to Albert B. is a scientific mystery because he was removed from the experiment before its completion, but it is safe to assume that this traumatic experience had some influence over his development based on the well-known effects of trauma alone. ("The Classical").

Little Albert had no valued opinion regarding his participation in the experiment. His fate was dictated by adults who could not communicate adequately to him the situation that he would be forced to endure, and the case of Little Albert is surrounded with controversy because of it. He was even denied the ability to complete the experiment at the mercy of his mother's personal judgement, whether or not this was the best, safest decision for him. Some might say that, as he aged, he could make the decision to no longer fear rats, but this is ignorant thinking. Something that has been built into the foundation of a person cannot be easily overcome. Albert, because of his conditioning, cannot control his thought process; he is not free to dictate what he does and does not fear.

All of these scenarios: religious restrictions, hierarchical limitations, biotechnology suppression, and results of classical conditioning; bring to light varying definitions of morality and propose an even more pressing question: Are we free to make our own decisions? In many cases, individuals are able to choose for themselves what they believe to be moral. Making the decision to decide what is morally "right" or "wrong", however, is determinedly riddled with outside influences that make it impossible for one to strictly think for oneself. By conforming to a branch of authority, one will likely sacrifice one's own wants and desires. Contrarily, by making choices outside of one's branch(es) of authority,

one will face consequences such as social pressures, a sense of guilt, or even irreversible psychological damage. If something comes at a cost, is it truly free? If one must endure working under such limitations, are they truly free? Is anyone truly free?

Freedom is relative, but how can this be? One can have the freedom to choose which branches of authority to abide by, but one cannot make one's own decisions within these constraints while also being free from potential consequences. Freedom, according to Merriam-Webster, is defined as "the quality or state of being free: such as... the absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint in choice or action" ("Freedom"). Relative to the initial choice, one can experience freedom. Relative to more specific choices, one is bound by the outer limits that one has chosen to comply with. The further a situation is analyzed, the more biased it becomes. Based on these revelations, freedom is a limited concept and its definition is dependent on the scope of its perspective. Because one has the ability to make a decision does not mean that one is always free to do so because some, if not most, choices come with a cost. These costs can materialize in forms of social scrutiny, physical punishment, alienation, etc. Depending on how far one looks into one's freedom will dictate one's results.

The concept of freedom is related to the concept of morality because both do not have a finite definition; they are at the mercy of perspective. In addition, the definition of morality is dependent on the scope of freedom one is experiencing when one is being confronted with the task of defining what is moral. Different scopes acknowledge different forms of criteria for something to be moral, making morality dependent on freedom.

Looking inwardly, one questioning one's own personal beliefs based on this startling revelation is amazing. One could argue that no thoughts are inherently our own. Independence, both individually and as a collective, itself is being made less of a choice and more of an obligation based of how opportunities are presented. American citizens supposedly live in "the Land of the Free", but they too are subjected to the laws of humanity. Is there a way to combat this? Can we release ourselves as a society from these laws of humanity that we have created to successfully stand the test of time? Or, in this case, is oblivion a more desirable perspective? That is is a decision for each person to make for themself... or is it?

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