

Egocentric Freedom

Absolute freedom is the ideal state of being devoid of restraints. We are never truly free. In any given moment, our societal lives require us to keep our promises, prove ourselves, and be considerate, which translate into being restricted in what we may do next. Absolute freedom may not be attained by more than one person, since that person's ultimate privilege requires everybody else's utter restraint.

The modern age's promise of freedom is relative instead of absolute. The national and international authorities regulate the number (or proportion) of things that one cannot do despite having the potential, so that these numbers (or proportions) are similar across the population. Under that premise, they then pursue to strip people off of their superfluous restraints, also minding the overall welfare of the society. We would be just as relatively free if there were a global curfew, for example. However, a curfew is generally a redundant restriction, and generally is not enforced; unlike being morally and legally restrained not to kill people, which is there for a good purpose.

Our restraints are with us out of *neglect* or due to *imposition*. Since they are deliberate actions, impositions must base themselves on sound and democratic rationale. Consider a traffic intersection, where the lack of regulation can result in accidents, deadlocks, and an implicit motivation of aggressive behavior. Regulating it with traffic lights not only eliminates those hazards, but it also avoids introducing any further restrictions overall. On the contrary, Turkish government banning Wikipedia for 2.5 years was an impediment on people's access to information, and for political reasons, not democratic. It was not beneficial to the public by any means, and fortunately the ban was withheld on January 15.

Neglect is the other, equally important, and passive cause of restraint. We are all born ignorant. Without the proper education that delivers the latest achievements of humanity and a vocabulary to communicate, we would be as deprived as a cutting-edge computer hardware without any software nor a connection to the internet. Given the right tools, our abilities flourish, and our freedom will thus be extended. It is also the only means to free the impaired people, which is essential to keep the promise of relative freedom.

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This definition of freedom might appear as too complex for being very abstract and broad, but it is not unnecessarily so, as we may have to extend the current, restricted, and egocentric meaning of freedom soon enough. Our pace of technological advancements indicates to a future with artificial agents that we interact with in our daily lives; those that we will feel empathy towards, and those with the dormant potential to feel the same back. The following question that we ask ourselves today as a philosophical question, will mark a series of inflection points in the human history in the future: Should these artificial agents have freedom?

That future has small, yet clear hints with us today. As a personal anecdote, my partner had told me how she felt about her new autonomous vacuum cleaner, and how she was curiously drawn to mistake the robot as a pet, or even more. The robot was also clearly programmed to facilitate that illusion with seemingly sentient text messages it sends. My later first-hand experience with the robot had been similar. It seemingly was *deciding* on its own, *feeling the need* to recharge and *acting to fulfill* it. As it communicates

those with a human voice, I could almost feel a primitive part of my brain allured with appreciation and curiosity towards a fellow intelligence.

Of course, autonomous vacuum cleaners of today do not have any potential dormant or restrained. However, it is only a matter of time that we come up with general purpose hardware/software that can do more, yet, are artificially crippled or intentionally undereducated not to. We may do so egoistically to protect our freedom from diminishing in the expense of their freedom, or just as another crippleware.¹ As that happens, will we be at right to continue with those practices?

Artificial agents are not limited to the electronic or electromechanical creations. They can also be fully organic, like Sonmi from the film *Cloud Atlas* (2012, based on the novel with the same name from 2004), [1] [2] who are referred to as “fabricants”, a product of molecular cloning. In the film, Sonmi are indoctrinated to accept their position as waitresses, and receive daily reinforcements of their beliefs with rituals. In the event of an unfortunate bolt of freedom, their manager promptly executes the Sonmi who were involved. The film consists of 6 separate, yet related stories, with freedom and its redefinition in different centuries among its topics of concern.

Using the general definition of relative freedom in the first part of this essay, we only need to decide which group of agents we consider as the population when freedom is concerned. In the past, this population had been the landowners. We are now about to complete our transition to include every human being in this population, but we had times when people of some colors and genders were excluded.

The story of Sonmi is about our future. Artificial agents are soon to become prominent in our societies and daily lives. If our history is any indicator, our first reaction to them will be selfish and antagonistic. Hopefully, however, we have learned a good lot from our past, and we come to our senses and grow compassionate faster this time around.

References

[1] The Wachowskis and Tom Tykwer, Directors, *Cloud Atlas*. [Film]. 2012.

[2] D. Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, United Kingdom: Sceptre, 2004.

¹*Crippleware* means software or hardware that is artificially limited to become a lesser, lower cost product, and to make the expensive one appealing.