

Topic IV

In short, the actions of a man are never free; they are always the necessary consequence of his temperament, of the received ideas, and of the notions, either true or false, which he has formed himself of happiness; of his opinions, strengthened by example, by education and by daily experience

- Holbach, Paul-Henri Dietrich

In short, I can't agree with Holbach's statement for several reasons. But before I start to analyze the implications of the quotation, I'd like to provide you with the background that leads to my disagreeing with the statement.

First of all we should more closely examine the meaning of the word "free". In my experience so far, I have come across two completely different conceptions of the word free, which can be distinguished by the suffix of the word. On the one hand some people believe that being free means to be free from something, while on the other hand some people see the meaning of being free in being free to do something (or nothing).

I personally don't like the first version, because to me it seems very problem-orientated. If I think that freedom is to be free from something¹, I define something positive as not-being negative, which still keeps the negative "alive" and present in my sub-consciousness or even in my mind.

Being "free to", on the other hand, is solution-orientated². This way a person defines being free as the possibility to do something (like pursue an interest or achieve something special).

He doesn't mismatch the new state with the old-state (and it's former boundaries), but instead he immediately sees the new possibilities and advantages.

To me this is a much more positively connoted conception of "being free".

Holbach, for example, definitely uses the first conception of free as a carrier of his statement.

He states that a man is never free from received ideas, his opinions...

To me the statement sounds a bit deterministically minded, but I'll go into detail later. It is true, that all what is listed has huge influence on our behaviour, on our subconscious behaviour that is. But the actions of a man are hardly ever totally subconscious³. Some may argue, that all our actions come directly from the subconscious. This assumption seems viable⁴. But Sigmund Freud's current revival and several cognitive studies, yield important information for this essay.

It has been found out⁵ that every "thought" that comes to our conscious mind, is at first thought by the subconscious (with a delay of about 120-200ms⁶). This might lead some people back to the conclusion, that we totally enslaved by our subconscious.

But we aren't. We have an enormous power, the power of the "VETO".

Free will actually isn't free will of the conscious, but rather a "free will-not". We have the power to not regard what our subconscious is telling us, to not give in to instincts or cravings.

So it might sound depressing, but we are not free to do, but rather "free not to" do.

¹ In all cases that I've come across, this "something" is a problem or something else that's negative. For example some students see school holidays as being free from school, which means that they define their freedom as a state of "not having to deal with something I don't like". This way the "problem" itself remains present in the students head, because it helps define the word "free".

² As in Steve de Chazer's SFBT (Solution-focussed brief therapy)

³ It has often been reported (and I as a former sportsman on international level have had the same) that during sport the processes acted out by the player are mainly subconscious. Still there mostly is a bit of thinking going on, like "will I try to pass the ball or try to out-run the defender" for example.

⁴ How could we know, if it weren't like that? We would have to perceive our subconscious with the limited capacities of our consciousness, which I doubt will happen, until there might be a further evolution of the mind.

⁵ Through several studies implying fMRI's (functional magnetic resonance imaging)

⁶ Scientific American Mind 2/2005

Seemingly this freedom is “not” given in every area, or at least I won’t state this, as I don’t want to have to bring my view on the question, if sexuality is a free choice or not, but stating that we have a “free won’t” in every area, would imply this.

I also think that there is also only a certain bandwidth of “No’s” the subconscious will take in certain areas.⁷

So my first point of disapproval is, that we are (nearly) always free, at least free not to.⁸

My second point of disapproval has to do with some implications Holbach didn’t regard in his statement.

Holbach doesn’t regard an individual’s power, to alter his perception of things. This is because there is no objectivity.⁹ Therefore there is no objective sense. Sense is made (or added) when things are perceived through a subject, which thinks about the sense of the thing.

And the only way we can give something a sense seems to be through connection and comparison. This problem that humans seem to be having with something undefined is very interesting, because it seems that we don’t like to let things “stand alone”. I think that this has to do with striving for safety. If we know something and understand it, we feel safer, because we think that nothing unexpected can happen. We want to know the why, so that we can understand. If we understand, we feel safe, because understanding an object makes us “better”¹⁰ than the object, meaning that the object no longer portrays a potential threat for us which again leads to satisfying the need for safety.

The thing about connections is that there are infinite possibilities.¹¹ At first our subconscious presents us with one connect (sense) it thinks viable. If we don’t like that version, we can say “no” and then we (or our subconscious) will look for other connections, until we are satisfied. The opposite would be to realize, that there mustn’t be a sense behind everything, but centuries of thinking in ways of causality make it hard for most people to accept this.

The key point is a connection between the psychological method of “reframing” and what Heinz von Foerster calls “non-trivial machines”¹².

Reframing means that we just change the frame (context) in which we perceive things. (example: someone finds money on the street. Frame A: “Someone must have lost it, I feel bad”. Frame B: “Thank god, I’m starving, and it’s better I use it to satisfy my basic needs, than some kid finding it and spending it on football-cards”)

We, humans, are non-trivial machines that have power of our inner-state.

We can reframe, change our inner-state and react differently, hopefully more positively.

Actually, I’d say that further examination of this would lead much further into the area of cybernetics, which we have slightly scraped so far. The reason for this being, that our inner-state is the result of a feedbacking-process between us and our surrounding. Going deeper into cybernetics, you could also apply the Nash-equilibrium here. Because once my view of my behaviour is

⁷ Every failed diet is a perfect example of repressed sexuality

⁸ I know that it says “a man’s actions are never free”, but to me deciding is an action. Therefore deciding not to take an action is also an action. (And I personally also believe that not doing an action is an action by itself, but that’s a question of taste [as is everything else])

⁹ My favourite quotation: “objectivity is the illusion, that observations could be done without an observer” – Ernst von Glasersfeld

¹⁰ For example, if we understand how a computer works, we have knowledge that the machine itself hasn’t and will probably never have (is A.I. possible?). This knowledge gives us power and having power also satisfies our urge for safety.

¹¹ Just think of the different explanations for Thunder in ancient cultures.

¹² The thing with non-trivial machines is, that an observer can only see the input and witness the output, but has no idea of what goes on inside, since non-trivial machines (in Foerster’s mathematical simplification [Knowledge and conscious]) have different inner-states they can inhabit (which mostly aren’t visible to the observer → except some emotional states), which also influences which output they deliver when receiving a certain input. So in short, the event “A” can trigger other reactions on Day Y than on Day X

compatible with what I presume as the surrounding's view of my behaviour and the input I get from my surrounding, there is no need for change, so no need for reframing. So the only time, when we need to reframe is, when what we want or expect isn't what we get.¹³

This means, that we are in fact free to reframe whenever we find it useful, to make connections between events as we want to, which once more, is a certain form of freedom. One could argue that this isn't freedom, because we only do so to satisfy ourselves, or that constant reframing is just making it easy for your self. Isn't being satisfied a requirement to be free¹⁴? What's so bad about making things easy for a change? We have (or make ourselves) enough unnecessary complications anyway, let's not waste further time and resources.

I also find that "and of the notions [...] which he has formed himself of happiness" is very clumsily expressed. On the one hand Holbach argues that man's actions are never free, but in the same sentence he states that man forms his own notions of happiness, which means that man is free to decide what happiness is to him, so the whole citation has a hint of "contradictio in se".

It would be very interesting to find out, how and why things make us happy. To come back neuroscience, are mirror-neurons responsible for our idea of happiness or is the emotion of happiness given to us a priori?

I think that there is a bit of truth in both. I think that some forms of emotional behaviour are hard-wired in our brain from birth (so a priori), but we still need to learn and practice when, how and why use them. Watching other people's emotions (→mirror-neurons) would therefore help us in understanding emotion as a child.¹⁵

Once again I'll also have to borrow the concept of feedbacking-processes from cybernetics, because I think that my thesis above might be viable, when explained with feedback.

I think that our a priori emotions only become what they become, through the reaction (feedback) we receive. This then might slightly change our concept of a certain emotion, which we will now test for its viability. This is repeated until a Nash-equilibrium is reached.¹⁶

At the beginning of the essay I mentioned that I think of the quotation as a bit deterministically minded. Because it states, that all our previous experiences (and beliefs,...) determine our behaviour. This could easily lead to the fallacy, that if we knew ALL about an individual, we could predict how he reacts to A. I'd like to refer to footnote #12 at this stage, because WE ARE NOT TRIVIAL AND WILL NEVER BE TRIVIAL.

A lot of politicians have understood this and gone one step further. The only way to make a non-trivial machine as trivial as possible, is to get rid of or alter (brainwashing) the "machine inside" or to make sure that the inner-state is a certain one, which is easy to control. The most popular adaptation of this concept is to make sure which inner-state someone is in, by emphasizing on matters that should yield emotions. The most popular emotion for warfare is fear, or taking away someone's feeling of safety, which leads to similar states. (See Hitler in WWII or Bush in Iraq [emphasizing on a phantom menace that can strike anytime and anywhere (terrorism)])

¹³ Can also be seen as Perturbation (Maturana/Varela 1978 "Tree of knowledge")

¹⁴ I say this, because when I have a certain need, that needs satisfaction, I'm only free to occupy myself with other things, once I've satisfied the need. Then I'm free to stop pursuing the fulfilling of that need.

¹⁵ I come to the conclusion that emotion needs practicing, because of the expression-less faces of the wolf-girls mentioned in "The Tree of Knowledge" (Maturana/Varela 1978)

¹⁶ Many studies could easily be done to try to falsify this statement. We could for example see if parents that don't adequately react to a crying child, might subconsciously get the child to repress or show less tears when grown up. Of course there is only a certain bandwidth of reactions, we will accept. A mother that laughs everytime when a baby cries (e vice versa) will probably not get him to trade these two emotions permanently, because I think that the difference between the perceived inner-state and the outside-reaction is to big, to ever lead to a Nash-equilibrium.

I hate to adapt the radical constructivists all the time, but self-fulfilling prophecies as described by Paul Watzlawick, also have an important role, when applied to this statement.

If I absolutely believe that I'm not free (if I listen to Holbach) then I'm really not free.

The point of self-fulfilling prophecies is that I believe something so strong in the present, that it influences my behaviour in a manner that leads to the prophecy becoming true (in the future).

The only way for such beliefs not to influence your behaviour, is to become aware of them. So in other words, they don't influence your behaviour if you use your "free no" and decide that you won't act in this way, but the hard part is the "getting aware of".

So, all in all, Holbach was right a little bit, because if he believed in the truth of his statement, HIS actions never were free.

I partly agree with the part about us never being free from "received ideas". We can't ever be free from others and their ideas, as long as we live with them. But we are free not to accept the ideas from outside¹⁷.

If we aren't free, so if we are really only slaves of our subconscious, what would be so bad about it? Don't you think that it has the best intentions for use, or do you think that this apparatus, that is clever enough to comprehend language and manage memories, is too stupid to understand that it's fate is closely linked to ours?

It's all about equilibrium. If we don't give our subconscious too many "No's" where we actually want a "Yes" (even though we are not aware of it) everything is fine.

Give it no "No" at all, and you really are purely a slave of it and give it too many "No" and it might even result in psychosomatic illnesses.

Even though not everyone will have understood this while reading, I'd like to present to you the core-meaning of this essay.

THINK POSITIVE. DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE UNCERTAIN. TAKE RESPONSIBILITY.

Don't think only of the sharks in the sea and but remind yourself why you went to the seaside in the first place. Who knows, shark-bites might also be self-fulfilling sometimes.

Trust your subconscious, it won't try to self-destruct without a reason. It must be at least partly rational, because all our rationality has it's roots there.

You have the power and freedom¹⁸ to do what you want, so make it your responsibility to do so.

¹⁷ Exception: subliminal stimulation (but who knows how it works in detail → not controllable [yet?])

¹⁸ Of course some things aren't possible and I would also like to remain within the boundaries of the categorian imperative