

How the freedom concept is affected by mundanity

Law



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Freedom: A Sick Game

“ Shukhov went to sleep fully content. He’d had many strokes of luck that day: they hadn’t put him in the cells ... And he hadn’t fallen ill. He’d got over it. A day without a dark cloud. Almost a happy day.” In such a favorable manner does a prisoner look upon the mundanity of his existence, through the psychological lens of subjective optimization, which, according to David McRaney, “ complements sour grapes, the inclination to see that which you can’t have as that which you didn’t want in the first place.” Shukhov, rather than reflecting on his unlucky existence through a life of forced labor, considers the lack of further torture luck. A prisoner’s life is fantastically simpler than a free man’s life: He needn’t worry himself with a plethora of choices and decisions, which all have the potential to haunt their vessel. Because a prisoner complies with the commands of others, it is as if his life is a destiny which lies beyond his control and therefore whatever happens does not correlate with my genuine desires and therefore I am a happy man. Throughout various works presented in this course an interrelationship is evident in that freedom is portrayed through a pitiful lens, almost a mocking one. Freedom, a supposed ideal for which to aspire, is equated with that which it seeks to become free from: Mundanity.

Shukhov’s contentment at the end of just another ordinary day is remarkably similar to Sharikov’s reflections upon returning to his original state in Bulgakov’s “ The Heart of a Dog”: “ I’ve been very, very lucky, he thought sleepily. Incredibly lucky. I’m really settled in this flat ... Certainly they cut my head around a bit, but who cares. None of my business, really.” Sharikov,

too, views his predicament as lucky. Sharikov, before receiving his operation, viewed Philip Philipovich's actions toward him with the warmest regards: "Never less than twice a day his eyes filled with tears of gratitude towards the sage of Prechistenka." He even grew to view his collar, a symbol of servitude, with pride: "A collar's just like a briefcase, the dog smiled to himself." Yet after his transformation into Poligraph Poligraphovich, Sharikov's docility turns into a need for self-expression, an opportunity granted to him through words.

Upon obtaining the power of speech, Sharikov immerses himself with subject matter conflicting the beliefs held by Philip Philipovich, his "owner," so much so that Philip orders Zina Petrovna to burn Engels' and Kautsky's "Correspondence." Sharikov truly yearns for freedom after obtaining it: After being freed from his collar, a representation of his servile existence, Sharikov's mind fills with extraneous desires, extraneous in that they did not belong to him as a dog. Of all his desires as a human, Sharikov most longs for autonomy, whereas when he was a dog he sought the opposite. Like Victor Frankenstein's creation, Philip Philipovich's creation seeks things which before did not even cross his mind. Thus, as a prisoner, man is content with a simple piece of bread, much like Shukhov. When "free," man is plagued by suffering due to unfulfilled desires and a separation between what is and what should be.

Says Alyosha near the end of Shukhov's simple day: "Why do you want freedom? In freedom your last grain of faith will be choked with weeds. You should rejoice that you're in prison. Here you have time to think about your

soul." Of the definitions for the word mundane, the following one provided by Google's online dictionary contradicts in every way Alyosha's statement: "Of this earthly world rather than a heavenly or spiritual one." It seems as if Alyosha is equating the mundanity of prison with spirituality. More specifically, Alyosha equates imprisonment, or the subjugation of one's will, with freedom. Untormented by false desires, unplagued by extraneous thoughts, willed to live in order to fulfill one's real or imagined life story, which hasn't been destroyed thanks to a lack of the unalterable responsibility that comes with decisions, prisoners are as free or freer than any autonomous man, who drags with him heavy burdens laid down over time, while the free man lives unsullied, for his life remains within.

Ivan Ilyich, on his deathbed realizes that he is more free now than he was during most of his life (55): "It occurred to him that what had appeared perfectly impossible before, namely that he had not spent his life as he should have done, might after all be true. It occurred to him that his scarcely perceptible attempts to struggle against what was considered good by the most highly placed people, those scarcely noticeable impulses which he had immediately suppressed, might have been the real thing, and all the rest false."

On the surface it may seem as if Ivan Ilyich's view of freedom conflicts with Alyosha's in that the "impulses" of which he reflects were thought to be sparks of freedom seeking to stray away from the conformity to more socially acceptable forms of behavior, prisoners seeking to become free men. Yet because these sparks of life failed to ignite, Ivan Ilyich, now on his

deathbed, is burdened with the failure of having not carried out his inmost desires, a choice he made as a result of being “ free.” A “ prisoner,” however, lives by these “ impulses,” for even though his actions are puppeteered, his inmost desires lie uncorrupted and incorruptable. This need for a puppeteer is exemplified in Aleksandr Serafimovich’s *The Iron Flood*. Without a puppetmaster the men are described as a confused mess (5): “ As though a huge beehive had lost its queen and was humming in frenzy, many-voiced and discordant.” Here individuals are shone in a helpless light, unable to act in harmoniously without a leader. Reader’s Digest defines collectivism as follows: “ Collectivism means the subjugation of the individual to a group – whether a race, class or state does not matter. Collectivism holds that man must be chained to collective action and collective thought for the sake of what is called the ‘ common good.’”

The nascent state of inharmoniousness which individuals found themselves in was soon replaced by a seemingly miraculous state of cooperation between individuals upon appointing a leader (16): “ For a moment there was utter silence. The steppe, the village, the boundless crowd – all seemed petrified. Then a forest of horny hands went up and a name was spoken. It went like thunder over the steppe, through the village with its endless orchards, beyond the river. ‘ Ko-zh-ukh!’” Before Kozhukh the crowd wasn’t even labeled as such, but rather “ a thousand-voiced horde,” “ many-voiced and discordant,” and uncertain, akin to a disrupted beehive. Here one doesn’t picture a crowd in the unifying sense, but rather a mass of individuals emanating uncertainty and frailty. Yet upon being anointing and subsequently uniting themselves under one leader the frail and uncertain

buzzing of bees transforms into a demanding sound of thunder, confident in its power and certain of its impetus.

Just as Alyosha recognizes his freedom in prison, so too do the individuals depicted here, much like Satan, resign themselves to a fate where they're actions are not their own, but rather a product of God's interminable will. For even though Satan must seek to resist his position as God's antithesis, he pities himself as a result of actions being out of his control. Now the bees become united under the hive of an almighty ruler, wherein their desires, like Shukhov's and Sharikov's, become incorruptable.

Says Ezra Glinter regarding Roadside Picnic: "The idea that there is something else out there implies that the situation here can potentially improve. Even the most grim dystopias are rarely without their redemptive escape hatch - a way out of the bind in which humanity has trapped itself." For Redrick Schuhart, the way out of this "bind" is the Zone, or rather what he perceives to be the Zone. After Arthur Burbridge's little speech and subsequent death, Red is described as existing without "a single thought in his head, and he had somehow stopped sensing himself."

Here Red is akin to the bees buzzing confusedly without a queen in The Iron Flood. "I have never had a thought in my entire life!" he realizes. His thoughts, or rather visions, continue discordantly, "all he saw were the faces and he wanted to destroy it, but he guessed that if it all disappeared there would be nothing left but the flat, bare earth." Then Red comes face-to-face with the golden sphere ... And admits his unknowing and therefore his animalistic state, akin to Sharikov. And the words, "Happiness for

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everybody, free, and no one will go away unsatisfied," echo from his mouth. The golden sphere, for Red, served as his Kozhukh, his higher power in which to invest his hope and unsynchronized fragments of thought, or whatever it is that takes place inside people's minds. Red's longing for the " faces" to be destroyed turns into a humble prayer for their happiness, for if he truly cannot think, the " all-powerful, all-knowing" golden sphere will think for him, and these are its wishes, as long as the " faces" are protected and as long as this protection takes place under its unquestionable rule.

Red " repeated his litany" without conscience, as if in submission to the golden sphere, abnegating himself to its omniscient presence. Happiness for free if thy bend thy knee. This golden sphere, seemingly representing something mystical and awe-inspiring, is in fact mundane. True, it grants freedom. But this freedom frees man from himself, it dichotomizes man's existence into a passive and observational one, free from the incessant nagging of his conscious mind. Whatever will be, will be ... The future's not ours to see ... Que sa ra, sa ra.

The Zone serves as Red's " redemptive escape hatch" in that he can now forfeit the mundanity of his existence to a higher power, just as Alyosha forfeited all responsibility for his life situation to Jesus Christ, Sharikov to Philip Philipovich, and Satan, although rightfully so, to God. Thus, Red's Zone and Shukhov's Zone are one and the same. When Red rejoices in his being freed from prison, Noonan notes the artificiality behind Red's tone. This is because deep down Red knew prison was the only thing to keep him from his mundane life.

Prisoners look at bars as if they're holding them back from something, in Shukhov's case that something would be "home." Yet what happens when prisoners are freed from behind bars? What happens to the drama, to the heightened awareness that comes from solitude and strangers, to the sense of reigmen, to the anticipation of getting released? Thus, time and again, freed prisoners find themselves behind bars again, for the thrill of it all, the thrill of believing someone else is accountable for one's well-being, that no matter how hard they try they cannot succeed for they are mere prisoners, yet they cannot fail, for that very same reason.

The same thrill fills the elder Burbridge's and Red's lungs when traveling through the Zone, the notion that there are powers beyond comprehension and that their lives are no longer completely in their control. While in the Zone they may complain that they want to get out and go back to the safety of their homes. What am I doing here? Yet Red realizes that he was never after the money, so if not for the money than what? A miracle? The miracle of losing himself, that's what.

Just as Sharikov is prepared to die atop a flight of steps, knowing that as a dog, he's done everything he could to survive, and just as Shukhov transforms into a happy man after eating a piece of bread, for after all what can he do against the almighty rulers, and so he is content at the end of the day, for he's done everything in his power to survive. Even our friend Ivan Ilyich finds joy in the coming of his death, for the very reason that he's acknowledged his failure to take control of his "impulses," almost as if society suppressed his true self, and therefore he is not to blame, and even if

he is, so what, I wasn't aware at the time. When all is said and done, Shukhov, Sharikov, Ivan and Red all wanted the same thing: to return to Sunday school.

Ivan Ilyich, in the midst of great inner turmoil, for “ the dying man was still screaming desperately and waving his arms,” came to a comforting and contenting realization after catching “ sight of the light”: “ Though his life had not been what it should have been, this could still be rectified.” And then, only now, right before his death, does he ask himself to point the way toward the right course of action, and he listens, as if awaiting an answer. Yes, it's true, that answer will come from a higher power, if it so chooses to come, but if not, if it doesn't show, so what, I asked for heaven's sake, cut me a break. I tried, I really did. Please, give me an answer, I'm begging, I admit before you my ignorance and weakness. But who is Ivan reaching out to? What is that silence that waits so patiently yet so powerfully and so presently? Who is meant to answer that silence, if it is to be answered at all? That silence, so painful for a lack of response yet so pleasurable for its purity, is deadened by life's mundanity, through the fast-paced lives of free men. Yet for a prisoner, that silence is his life, for at the end of the day, in the words of Josè Saramago, “ Patient and confident of its power, loneliness was waiting for him.”