

There Ain't No Such Thing as a Free Lunch

(Paper #5)

In Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* at the crossroad of politics and ethics lies question: "Must one also pay for deeds which were right and necessary?" (Koestler 45) It is a complicated question, made up from at least three areas and can be approached from two points of view (personal and societal) and can be looked at from various frameworks (utilitarian, deontologist or religious). Because of the numerous factors listed above there is no single simple answer; we can all seek out our own. For me the answer is that paying the dues are inevitable in one form or another. Depending on our deeds, we may pay internally by our conscience being tortured. Or if we suppress them and sensitive enough psychosomatic or other mental hygiene symptoms show up. And ultimately if we break the laws or conventions of the society we live in we may pay the consequences as that very same society deems it fair. Koestler showed us all three. One way or another we always have to pay for our deeds or as Robert A. Heinlein put it in his book, *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*, "There Ain't No Such Thing as a Free Lunch".

The first sub-question we can inquire who decides whether an act was right at the first place? The protagonist made the choice to accept the dogma that "The Party can never be mistaken." (34). Thus he transferred the responsibility of decision making to an outside entity. It was a decision he made early in his life. Later however he had less and less of a choice to keep up with his decision out of his own free will because the state turned into a totalitarian regime. He, being one of the founding fathers of this new type of state, certainly believed originally that he was doing the right and necessary things. As he wrote in his diary: "the individual was nothing, the Party was all" (66). This included creating the entity that took over decision making. The process was supposed to focus on the best interest of the country, but we know now that it strayed away

from this path. Rubashov also recognized it. One of the reasons for this was that the organization (the Party) no longer was connected to the individuals. The feedback mechanisms from the citizens to the people in power was too formalized and ultimately severed. Thus it became impossible for the leaders to look out for the citizens' interest even if they wished to do so (which is doubtful.) Without the checks and balances that are in place in democratic societies the organization cannot be capable of making the "right" decision. Particularly if at its head sits such a paranoid person as Stalin, who was "the embodiment of an absolute belief in the infallibility of one's own conviction" (164). If he is the person who decides what is "right" for another individual that person could be and was in trouble. I read recently somewhere that he personally signed the death warrant for 20,000 people. (Sorry, don't recall the source.) With the proper processes in place several people together can make better decisions than any single person, even assuming the best of intention of that individual. Which we should not necessarily assume in this case.

To put the same question in a slightly different angle: to what extent should we allow politics to intervene with the individual's life? In a totalitarian system it is mostly a theoretical question. Rubashov's fate was sealed either way, independently whether he signed the confession or not. The total system strived for and achieved total control. What we can try to learn from it is how to disable the conditions that allowed the birth of such a system. I believe one of the principles we have to look out for and keep intact is exactly the very issue of limiting the state's power over the individual. You may call it fighting against the erosion of civil liberties, human rights or just self-determination. I acknowledge that living in a society requires us to keep in balance the individual's rights and that of the community. This is why laws and their enforcement are required. However I support that justification for laws against actions should be based on the harm principle: if an action harms others it should be punished. I am against legal moralism,

because most of our moral code is culture dependent, which used to vary from society to society.

But in a global society where cultures are interacting with each other in numerous ways it is impossible and impractical to enforce it. To summarize: the state is responsible for minimizing the harm its citizens are causing to each other. It has no rights to limit what they do to themselves, but it should provide support to those who require or need it.

Another way to formulate the original question is whether a person is responsible for her/his own acts. My answer is a firm yes. Koestler's answer may seem less firm, but the book's conclusion doesn't contradict it. There are always circumstances, excuses and influences, but we all make choices and have to bear their consequences. Granted often these choices are not between right and wrong, but between two wrongs. A more challenging part of the issue whom one is responsible to? This is where Rubashov's tragedy lies. The Party is ruling over him and decides his fate, so at the first glance the answer seems to be that he is responsibly to that entity. However his inner struggle proves that he believes that at the same time he is also responsible to his own moral code. Thus he sentences himself from within for one set of acts that looking back he considers crimes, and this is what he is asking about in the opening quote. However the state sentences him for another set of actions. Technically he didn't commit those. On one hand he felt guilty for other acts and on the other hand he weighed his duty towards the assumed common good heavy enough to sign the confession.

We could also explore what is "due", what are the appropriate consequences for his actions? Rubashov pays the ultimate price with his life. Was it a "just" sentence? From the totalitarian state's point of view it made the right one, where the question of justice was not an issue. The punishment served the state's purposes, thus it was functional, and thus it was necessary. In any other framework though punishments usually have some relations to the severity

of the acts committed. The “thoughtcrimes” (after George Orwell’s 1984) Rubashov committed wouldn’t even have been considered punishable. And for the acts he himself felt responsible for, for example executing the Party’s command that sent Little Loewy to suicide would be rather difficult to figure out what “due” would be. The circumstances are so complex that I cannot attempt it here.

One may also ponder on what criteria the Party was deciding what was “right” and “wrong”. There is a tension in the answer. On one hand their idealistic principles would suggest that “right” should be based on whatever is the best interest of the country and its people. On the other hand reality showed that the decision makers are people too and not above making mistakes, considering their own personal interests. This is why situations can develop where they act in direct violation of their principles as we have seen in the case of the oil shipment from USSR to Italy.

Another related question is whether any certain act was necessary. Did the Party have to excommunicate Richard from its ranks? I believe it was not done out of necessity but out of needlessly sticking to dogmatic principles in an evolving situation when those very principles should have been interpreted in new ways. Idealism won over pragmatism: in the name of an ideology countless people were executed. But this statement is true the other way around as well: pragmatism ruled out idealism, because in order to keep the established state running those who were in power forsake the original, communist ideology and watered it down to something I would label as “state capitalism”. In my view and the other non-utilitarian models it is a wrong to sacrifice human lives in the name of an imaginary but non-existent grand goal. I can envision situations where the ultimate self-sacrifice for an idea can be an acceptable choice but only voluntarily, not prescribed by others.

On the practical level the book is suggesting that we cannot escape the outcomes of an act even if we did it solely based on someone else's instructions. We made the choice to follow those orders even if we believed that they are wrong. This is exactly what happened to Rubashov. He knew of himself that "he had not learned the virtue of self-deception" (55) He still has a conscience, cannot just act blindly. Or if he does it will haunt him.

Back to the original question: the author seems to suggest in a subtle way that the answer for the question in the first paragraph is yes. Rubashov had a toothache after he practically sentenced Richard to death. On the first morning in prison he doesn't get breakfast, because he has been told that he said he had a toothache. He did no such thing, but that is part of the answer for the big question. He started to pay his fare. No matter what angle we looked at the issue the answer was that there are always consequences.