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Zeno's Conscience and the Future of Man

The end. But of what? Of meaning, traditionally. But then this can't be the end. There isn't any meaning here, not yet. But there is something about finality that really imparts meaning. You don't know the sum of a man's life until he's expired, and you don't know what the "durable" in "durable good" means until you've destroyed the good. But it's not just the object of the end that receives meaning, the subject is also defined. It is against the completed lives of others that we can measure ourselves, and each "end" that passes us by is like a notch on our staff of life – the more ends we've seen the more fully we've lived.

In Italo Svevo's novel, *Zeno's Conscience*, the title character has internalized this concept that finality has unique powers for imparting meaning. Says Zeno of smoking,

I believe the taste of a cigarette is more intense when it's your last.

The others, too, have a special taste of their own, but less intense. The last one gains flavor from the feeling of victory over oneself and the hope of an imminent future of strength and health. The others have their importance because, in lighting them, you are proclaiming your freedom, while the future of strength and health remains, only moving off a bit. (12)

This theme of smoking a last cigarette runs throughout the story, and Zeno is so obsessed over it that he smokes a last cigarette almost daily. He is able to do this with complete honesty and with no hypocrisy because he genuinely plans for his current cigarette to be

his last. But the best laid plans of mice and men oft go awry, and besides, by the following day circumstances will have changed and indeed, so will have Zeno!

It is through his confidence in his future, that he will not only have one but that it will be filled with an immense potential for practically anything (even resuming smoking, after all!), that he is able to honestly give up smoking forever today. This same kind of mentality can be seen in a modern college student, after a night of partying, declaring, “I’ll never drink again!” Such a declaration does give “the feeling of victory over oneself and the hope of an imminent future of strength and health,” and it is no less genuine for the fact that it will likely be violated, given enough time.

But that is not to deny the power of non-ultimate acts, or of cigarettes that aren’t last ones. As Zeno says, these “others have their importance because, in lighting them, you are proclaiming your freedom, while the future of strength and health remains, only moving off a bit.” Such it is that a contemporary job seeker can change his or her job a dozen times in the span of a decade, and feel a self-affirmation of freedom, secure in the knowledge that their future of financial independence and stability remains, it’s only been moved off a bit. And not by such a large bit, after all, just one cigarette’s worth.

I connect what Zeno says to modern man because I see in modern man what is perhaps an over-application of Zeno’s internalized knowledge. But before I can explain what I mean by that, I must let Zeno say what a “modern” man is:

But bespectacled man ... invents devices outside of his body, and if health and nobility existed in the inventor, they are almost always lacking in the user. Devices are bought, sold, and stolen, and man becomes increasingly shrewd and weaker. His first devices seemed

extensions of his arm and couldn't be effective without its strength; but, by now, the device no longer has any relation to the limb. (436)

And so it is that modern man, bespectacled man, has transcended the bounds of his humanity, the limits that constrained the futures of his ancestors, using his clever devices. We are all aware of the results: increased longevity of the bespectacled man, an increased amount of opportunity, and a vaster and more nuanced way of thinking and of seeing the world. This has created an entire generation of people with futures like Zeno's, that is to say, an entire generation of people who are able to have "last cigarettes" and feel "the feeling of victory over oneself and the hope of an imminent future of strength and health."

Zeno proposes to several women in the course of his life, but only one accepts. One who turned him down had this to say,

"You mustn't take offense, Zeno, because that would grieve me. I know you're a good sort and you know many things, without knowing it, whereas my professors know exactly what they know. (134)

Now this is a curious statement. The professors know exactly what they know, whereas Zeno knows many things, without knowing it. If the modern man is like Zeno, then perhaps it is those who came before the modern man who are like the professors.

Before people had all of their devices with which they could prolong life, multiply opportunity, and broaden thought in an all-encompassing embrace of the planet, the world was much narrower. But maybe it was deeper as well. The professors, our ancestors, lived in a world in which they knew what they knew because it took nearly a

lifetime to understand their own knowledge. Or at least, it took one of their average lifetimes.

Modern people, bespectacled people, now not only live longer but know they will. They lack the looming spectre of a swift end, and like Zeno can afford to smoke a string of last cigarettes, confident that their future is large enough to encompass any sort of change, even reversals. This sense of a vast future where anything can change leads to a pronounced uncertainty, described best as “know[ing] many things, without knowing it.” Modern man is apt to think, “I know this today, but will it be known tomorrow?” just as Zeno can declare today to be his last day as a smoker, but what about tomorrow?

By contrast, our shortsighted short-lived ancestors knew that today, in fact, decides tomorrow.

But cut free from the maxim of today deciding tomorrow, what will become of us? If our world is anything like Kafka’s *The Castle* (that is to say, heavily bureaucratized and compartmentalized), then we may be entering an indeterminate fog with no meaning-making end. *The Castle* begins with K. arriving in a village, where there is presumably a castle. But,

There was no sign of the Castle hill, fog and darkness surrounded it, not even the faintest gleam of light suggested the large Castle. K. stood for a long time on the wooden bridge that leads from the main road to the village, gazing upward into the seeming emptiness.

Then he went looking for a night’s lodging. (1)

He finds an inn, though not the Castle, and settles down to sleep. But he is soon awakened by a man who introduces himself as the son of the Castle steward, who says,

This village is Castle property, anybody residing or spending the night here is effectively residing or spending the night at the Castle. Nobody may do so without permission from the Count. But you have no such permission or at least you haven't shown it yet.

K., who had half-risen, ... said: "What village have I wandered into? So there is a castle here?" (2)

Remarkably enough there appears to be reason for K. to be unsure of whether there is even a castle present, even though we learn later that he has come to this village specifically to reach the castle. He will spend the rest of his life in the novel attempting to reach the castle, and though he sometimes glimpses bits of it, he is never able to get past people like the son of the Castle steward and actually gain access to the Castle, which he can only presume really exists.

The son of the Steward answers K.'s question,

"Why, of course ... the Castle of Count Westwest."

"And one needs permission to spend the night here?" asked K. ...

"Permission is needed," was the reply ...

"Then I must go and get myself permission, said K., yawning and pushing off the blanket, as though he intended to get up.

"Yes, but from whom?" asked the young man.

"From the Count," said K., "there doesn't seem to be any alternative."

"Get permission from the Count, now, at midnight?" cried the young man, stepping back a pace.

“Is that not possible? K. asked calmly. “Then why did you wake me up?” (2)

The son of the Steward replies with indignation; he clearly needed no reason other than it being against the rules for people without permission to sleep in the Castle, which the village inn is technically considered to be, for it belongs to the Castle. K. finally responds by stating that he was sent for by the Castle to come as a land surveyor. This assertion has to be verified, naturally, since it has referred to an authority above the son of the Steward, and he promptly makes a phone call. He learns that no land surveyor was sent for and denounces K. Moments later the phone rings, and,

After listening to a fairly long explanation, he said softly: “So it’s a mistake? This is most unpleasant. The department head himself telephoned? Odd, very odd! And how am I supposed to explain this to the land surveyor?”

K. listened intently. So the Castle had appointed him land surveyor. (5)

This scene must strike a certain chord of resonance with modern readers, with modern, bespectacled men! The plastic bureaucracy at work here is both remarkable and familiar. The isolated units of command that have no knowledge of those above them or those below them, but only know what their task is and to carry it out unless told from above not to, is shown in the son of the Steward and the main office whom he calls, and the department head who calls the main office. K. is the person trying to interact with this system of isolated units of command, and so foggy and thick is the bureaucracy that

he is uncertain a Castle actually exists, and is mildly surprised to learn the Castle, if it does exist, has truly appointed him land surveyor, as he expected.

This is precisely the kind of world in which we have come to exist. One goes to a government building for an appointment, is told one is not allowed inside because it is a sensitive area, and when one declares one has been called for, one is told to wait. Eventually, if all of the memos got sent (and maybe they didn't!), one will be told to come on in.

That kind of compartmentalized world has problems enough without being compounded by a population of Zenos, who no longer believe today decides tomorrow, and instead know that tomorrow is completely different from today, and indeed anything at all could happen. A bureaucracy as described above can thrive in a perpetual manner when confronted by Zenos, because they will never believe strongly enough that what happened to them today (being told, as K. is told, that he can get to the Castle later) will happen to them tomorrow. Zeno will instead see each evasion, each redirection, each piece of red tape, as the last piece. A man with Zeno's conscience would be so aware of his "imminent future of strength and health" that he would neglect to be aware of his present of fog and motionless bureaucracy.

With every day a distinct end that gives meaning to only itself and which promises a new future, there will be no one looking for an End that gives meaning to tomorrow as well, and as such the tomorrow that today we hope for will be hopelessly lost in the fog, and the gray plasticity of K.'s world will go on without end.

Bibliography

Svevo, Italo. *Zeno's Conscience*. Random House Inc., NY 2001.