

Reflections

*Freedom From The
Pursuit of Happiness*



Most of us would likely agree that we would like to live in a society in which people are free to pursue their highest ambition. In practice we know that this involves many difficult and complex debates concerning the freedoms of groups relative to the freedom of individuals as well as a host of practical limitations and cultural realities that make such a goal so elusive and difficult.

It is commonly held that a high level of wellbeing is achieved when a population is able to actively and effectively pursue what they desire. A pursuit that is constrained in only minimal ways (protecting others, making sure that contracts are honored etc.). The idea is that a happy society is one in which we have the ability, hypothetically at least, to gain the fame, money, relationship, creative venture, lover etc. that we seek.

At its most extreme, the pursuit of ones personal aims can come across as deeply self-interested, even selfish. The CEO driven by the desire for extreme wealth, or the artist consumed by ambition.

These ideas are built upon the idea of utilitarianism, which was most powerfully articulated by Jeremy Bentham in the 19th century. This is the idea that the basic motor that guides our behavior lies in giving ourselves to actions that we believe will maximize our pleasure and/or minimize our pain. According to utilitarianism, people are primarily self-interested creatures seeking their own betterment and happiness.

However, it was the disciple of psychoanalysis that offered a radical critique of this notion, something that can also be found within theology. Namely, that people often don't act in selfish ways, but in profoundly selfless ways. Not selfless in the moral sense that the word has in its popular usage, but actually a profoundly perverse selfishness in which we engage in acts that are obviously against our best interests. Freud's groundbreaking work in this area focused on what he called "the death drive".

The philosopher Slavoj Žižek describes the death drive via the zombie, an undead creature so driven to bite the living that it has no regard for its own wellbeing (walking into fires, barbwire fences or a hail of bullets). The zombie is showing no regard for itself in its unrelenting drive. For Žižek, the zombie is such a captivating figure because it expresses something deeply human. The inhuman part of the human. Indeed, this is one of the interesting things about *The Walking Dead*; the zombie virus isn't external to us - in traditional zombie stories we need to be bitten in order to receive it - but is already in us - when we die we become a zombie.

To understand this, take the example of someone seeking fame and fortune above all else. One can often see the negative effect of this drive in the broken relationships, stress and ill-health that results from the insatiable pursuit. Yet often this is not some unknown side effect of the pursuit. Such people are often able to see that their obsession is not enhancing their life but actually destroying it. At certain points they might, over a drink, confess that their desire is not liberating but rather oppressive, and that they would like to be free of it so that they might be able to more fully enjoy the relationships, possessions and lifestyle they already have.

What we see here is the way that the freedom to pursue our highest ambitions is not always experienced as a freedom from some oppressive system, but is itself often felt to be deeply oppressive.

By employing some of the insights from psychoanalysis and parts of the theological tradition, the practice of psychotheology - its liturgical technology - is designed to help provide a space that can help us find freedom from the death drive to

pursue our highest ambition. This is not a move from pursuing something to pursuing nothing, but rather is designed to target the virus of the death drive, so that we can actually struggle to enrich our world without the drive that always undermines us.

This means creating a liturgical space that undermines the death drive. Instead of being a place where we go to pursue some highest pleasure (heaven, ecstatic experience, an escape from our everyday life) transformance art offers a place where we lay this pursuit down in favor of a life drive that seeks to create a better world without destroying it in the process.



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