



The End

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One way to address some of the important issues at stake in Frank Ruda's book *Abolishing Freedom* would be to ask the question of the relationship between repetition and ending. Repetition is a vast and complex philosophical notion; it is also one of the "four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis," as the title of Lacan's famous seminar suggests. The topics of the end (of many things, such as art and history, as well as even more radical apocalyptic expectations, including that of a "total extinction") also have heavily charged philosophical (and psychoanalytic) resonances. In view of this, our little attempt here to speak of their relationship—and to speak of it in a rather anecdotic way—cannot but come across as comedic. So be it. The text that follows is not a commentary on Ruda's book. It is more like a light philosophical side dish to Ruda's work, connecting and dialoging with some of its conclusions especially concerning the end of repetition and the repetition of the end. It is a sign of a great text when one gets all kinds of (further) ideas while reading it. What follows is an exposition of some of the ideas I got from reading Ruda's book.

An inherent relationship between repetition and ending exists in many phenomena of repetition, and of ending. The end is not simply something that ends the repetition (or repetitive perpetuation of something), but is essentially implied in (or perpetuated by) the repetition itself. Let us start by looking at two modalities of an inherent relation between repetition and ending. The two modalities are by no means exhaustive of this relation, but they are likely to be the most common. The first can be put under the following heading:

1. "I can end it whenever I want to!"

We are probably all familiar with this kind of configuration where the possibility of ending what we are doing is the very condition of its repetition. Be it a relationship (and its recurring scenes or difficulties) or a (bad) habit, "not having the strength/will to end it" strictly correlates to the *possibility* of ending it, stopping it. Possibility is the crucial term here. It is precisely what allows us not to act (not to end it, in our case). Why bother now? It can wait. The possibility suffices. A nice comic example of this logic is provided in one of the episodes of Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*. The episode starts with the famous "Every sperm is sacred" song, performed by a catholic family with a comically huge number of children. The perspective then shifts to a protestant couple observing them through the window and commenting on these "bloody Catholics," as the husband puts it. "But why do they have so many children?" asks the wife. "Because every time they

have sexual intercourse, they have to have a baby.” The wife is confused: “But it’s the same with us. We’ve got two children, and we had sexual intercourse twice.” “That’s not the point,” retorts the husband, “we could have had it any time we wanted.” The scene goes on and the husband brags about how their religion allows them to use condoms, even those that enhance pleasure. “Have you got one?,” asks the wife: “Well, no, but I can go down the road any time I want, and walk into Harris’, and hold my head up high and say in a loud, steady voice: ‘Henry, I want you to sell me a condom. In fact, today I’ll have a French tickler, for I am a protestant!’” “Well, why don’t you?,” the wife is curious...

Following the same logic, the possibility to end (stop) something can be precisely what makes us get involved in it and perpetuate it. And, of course, the fact that the end is structured here as a *possibility* makes this interrogation part of a larger one. Namely and precisely the one that Ruda takes up in relation to the issue of freedom: freedom as possibility, as potentiality, as capacity (exemplified in the freedom of choice), is the best antidote to actual freedom. Freedom (as possibility/capacity) has become a signifier of oppression, which Ruda proposes to counteract with “comic fatalism.” He formulates several slogans of this fatalism, some of which directly evoke the idea of the end: they suggest that a way out of this freedom-as-oppression is to act as if the end had already happened (“Act as if the apocalypse had already happened!” “Act as if you were dead!” “Act as if everything were always already lost!”). So, if you want to end a bad relationship, act as if you have already ended it. Or, here this works even better: if you want to stop smoking, act as if you have already stopped. (And declare, “retroactively,” that the cigarette you smoked half an hour ago was actually your last cigarette...) The problem, however, which would perhaps deserve more attention, relates to the *als ob* (as if) modality as such, and to its limitations. This famous Kantian modality has its own pitfalls, which is why, in his ethics, Kant had to supplement it with the pure tautological reference to duty as providing the (sole) incentive. In other words, and to put it very simply: whereas the *als ob* formula tells us how to act, it falls short of providing the “push” (*Triebfeder*) that would in fact make it practically possible for us to act in this way. Once I effectively act *as if* I had already stopped (smoking), the case is arguably won, but the question remains: how do I actually get to act as if I had already stopped? There seems to be a small, but significant gap here...

Moreover, when accentuating the mode of “possibility” (potentiality) as the main problem in this kind of configuration, we should be careful to add and stress the following: once possibility enters the game and structures it, one should resist understanding or presenting the stakes simply in terms of possibility *versus* actuality (actual action), that is, in terms of the opposition between a possibility and its realization. For this is precisely how freedom as oppression works in practice. It works following the logic of the superego, most concisely defined by Žižek as the reversal of the Kantian “you must, therefore you can” into “you can, therefore you must.” Possibilities are here to be taken, realized, by all means and at any price. You can do it, therefore you must! The culture (and economy) of possibilities is not suffocating simply because there are so many possibilities, but because we are supposed not to miss out on any of them. A person who just sits at home, relishing the idea of all the possibilities and opportunities capitalism has to offer and doing nothing to realize them, is not the kind of person this system needs. What we are expected to do is to realize as many possibilities as possible (to act), but never to question the framework of these possibilities as possibilities. Which is precisely where “actual” freedom has to be

situated: not simply in the actual realisation of possibilities but in (“unscrewing”) the very framework based on the idea of freedom as possibility to be realized. Ruda makes this point very clearly.

And to make it even more clear, we should perhaps add that the protestant couple from *The Meaning of Life* are certainly not ideal consumers, and they are not (yet) caught up in the superego imperative of enjoyment. What they, and our reaction to them, expose is precisely the risk of a swift conclusion that consolidates the “capitalist” logic, namely, the following conclusion: were they to act on these possibilities they have, they would be really free. Which of course is not the case. In other words, the problem is not that that they don’t act, although they could have, but rather that if they were to act this act already would have been caught up in an inexorable logic of freedom as realization of possibilities—a logic over which they (and their “freedom”) have very little influence. But their example functions in the first place to illustrate the logic of the relationship between repetition and ending with which we started: they can go on practicing their Puritanism because they believe they can end it whenever they want...

So let us return to the beginning of this digression, to the *economy* (psychological economy, “little arrangements with oneself”) at work between our repeating something and the possibility of ending it. Because there is clearly an economy here, an economy that allows me, for example, to go on smoking, while the possibility of quitting is here just in order to help me smoke. How many people would start smoking if the state, instead of putting warnings, threats, and disgusting images on cigarette packs, would pass a law stating that if you start smoking, you are not allowed to quit? Ever. Once you start, you commit to it for life. The structure we are dealing with in this first mode of the relation between repetition and ending could thus be defined as follows: we are infinitely approaching the end as the limit (putting it off); yet this limit is not simply there, at the end of it all, as it seems to be, but is—as possibility, potentiality—also the very precondition of the movement of repetition, what in a certain way structures it... It is also what buys us the freedom to enjoy whatever we are doing. It also structures the enjoyment of ending it. For we must not overlook that the enjoyment here is not simply on the side of smoking; it is, at least as much, the enjoyment in the postponing of the end (as an absolute enjoyment). So, there is an economy at stake here, but it is not the only kind. The other mode of the relationship between repetition and ending is perhaps even more interesting, and we can put it under the following heading:

2. “This is the end. This the last time I do it.”

In order to exemplify this logic (as well as a few other things, some directly related to the issue of “abolishing freedom”), let me introduce a literary reference: a novel by Italo Svevo, *La coscienza di Zeno* (*Zeno’s Conscience*, written in 1923). Svevo (the pseudonym of Aron Ettore Schmitz) was an Italian writer and businessman living in Trieste, also a close friend of James Joyce (who is in fact responsible for the deserved fame of Svevo’s novel, which passed unnoticed when published).

Zeno’s Conscience wonderfully depicts another possible kind of economy at stake in the relationship between repetition and ending. The key word here—to continue with the example of cigarettes, which are also at the center of the novel—is not “sometime (but not

just now), I will quit smoking,” but “this cigarette right here and now is the last cigarette I will smoke,” the *ultima sigaretta*. (And, as Zeno remarks, to better underline one’s inner resolve, one likes to end smoking together with the end of something else: for example, the month, the year. There is thus an interesting dimension of repetition pertaining to the end or ending itself.)

Of course, nothing tastes as good as the *ultima sigaretta*. Here are Zeno’s reflections on this, where he also compares it to the other mode of the relation between smoking and quitting (quitting as a future possibility):

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.¹

The fact that it is the “last cigarette” adds something to its taste. It makes it the best cigarette ever, and it makes you really enjoy it. So the idea (or ideal) would be to think of every cigarette you smoke as your last one, and enjoy it accordingly. However, and here is the catch, in order for this strategy to work, you really have to *believe* that it is the last one, that this IS the end. In other words, you have to be a neurotic (as Zeno, the main character of the novel, certainly is), and the economy at stake here is not that of little arrangements with oneself. In terms of the economy of enjoyment, you cannot help yourself here by acting *as if* this were your last cigarette. You cannot say to yourself, “I will act as if this were my last cigarette, and this way I’ll get to enjoy it more.” You want to stop; you do everything in your power to stop (and Zeno really goes to some extremes here, including having himself kidnapped and locked up in a hospital); but you end up accumulating one last cigarette after another, that is, you end up infinitely *repeating the end*—and enjoying it, rather *against your will*. Strictly speaking, the economy here is unconscious economy, or, even more precisely, it is the economy of the unconscious.

No wonder, then, that *Zeno’s conscience* is actually a novel “about” psychoanalysis. The novel consists of Zeno’s memoirs, in which his obsession with smoking and his being in analysis for it play a prominent part. As we read in the “Preface,” allegedly written by his analyst to whom Zeno sent his memoirs at some point, the analyst decides to publish the memoirs “in revenge,” because Zeno had suspended his treatment.

Differently from the previous configuration, in which the end (as possibility) was inherent to the repetition, what is at stake here is rather that *repetition is inherent to the end*; there is something about the end itself that drives the repetition, and repetition is essentially *repetition of the end*.

So, when looking at repetition from this perspective, we end up with two kinds of ends: the end that is repeating itself (and is thus one with repetition), and the end that could eventually put an end to this repetition (of the end).

¹ Italo Svevo, *Zeno’s Conscience*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 12.

It seems that there is an end on both sides of repetition; and that there is repetition on both sides of the end, since to put an end to the repetition itself (as repetition of the end) would not only amount to putting an end to this (repeated) end, but would also amount to *repeating* this end, “achieving” it, as it were.

By way of a short digression, could we not say that the stakes of the famous Hegelian thesis about the “end of art” is structured precisely following this mode of repetition, namely as an unceasing repetition of the end? In *The Man Without Content*, Giorgio Agamben takes seriously Hegel’s claim that art has exhausted its spiritual vocation, and that it is no longer through art that Spirit principally comes to knowledge of itself.² But this is not to say, he argues, that Hegel proclaimed the “death of art” (as this is often interpreted). Rather, he proclaimed the indefinite continuation of art in what Hegel called a “self-annulling” mode. This indefinite continuation in a “self-annulling” mode does in fact correspond perfectly to what we are describing here as the repetition of the end. Art ends, again and again, with every significant (“new”) artistic project...

But let’s return to Zeno. He is quite sceptical about his analysis, about what it can achieve and how, as well as about his doctor. Yet his doctor seems to get at least some things right. One of them is that Zeno’s disease was not the smoking itself (as Zeno thinks), but his *obsession with ending it* (or rather that smoking and quitting are actually one and the same passion for him). So that the real question is not why does he smoke so much, but rather: *why does he want to stop, “end it,” so badly?* The core of Zeno’s pathology (in all its comic dimension) lies here, and not simply in his smoking.

So, at some point, the doctor tries a new strategy, telling Zeno that there is no reason for him to stop.

These are his words: smoking wasn’t bad for me, and if I were convinced it was harmless, it would really be so. And he went further: now that the relationship with my father had been revealed and subjected to my adult judgment, I could realize I had contracted that vice to compete with my father; and had attributed a poisonous effect to tobacco thanks to my unconscious moral feeling that wanted to punish me for my rivalry with him.

That day I left the doctor’s house smoking like a chimney.³

So the doctor serves him a full explanation of why Zeno thinks that smoking is so bad for him, but the point I would like to emphasize is that the doctor’s suggestion (that smoking isn’t bad for him) aims at disrupting *both* possible economies involved in the relationship between repetition and ending that we are discussing here. Not only the urgency, the imperative to stop immediately, but also the perspective of the possibility to stop at some later point. What he imposes upon Zeno with his intervention is the absolute freedom to smoke, which throws out not only the *imperative* to end, but also the cause that structures the framework of smoking in terms of the possibility of ending it. No end in sight, no end to repeat, nor to infinitely approach. Why end at all? This changes the configuration radically and, as it could be expected, affects Zeno badly. He goes on smoking like a chimney for a while, and then he concludes: “the freedom to smoke whenever I liked

² Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

³ Svevo, *Zeno’s Conscience*, 412.

finally depressed me totally. I had a good idea: I went to Dr. Paoli.”⁴ (Dr. Paoli is a “true” doctor, a physician, and Zeno desperately wants him to find some physical cause for his neurotic state, a real disease instead of an imaginary one, as he puts it.)

Dr. Paoli is not of much help. He finds no physical disease that would relieve Zeno. But then—to cut a long story short—Zeno eventually finds a way out of his ordeal: he never returns to analysis and hence effectively ends it. Not in any solemn way; he just postpones going there. And after a while, he realizes that he has ended it. In doing this, he also stops smoking: “I have finally succeeded in returning to my sweet habits, and stopped smoking. I am already much better since I have been able to abolish the freedom that foolish doctor chose to grant me.”⁵ Here we have it most literally: “abolishing freedom” can have a most liberating effect, and this is indeed a very nice example that one should add to Ruda’s list! What is also interesting in Zeno’s wording here is the implication that one can abolish only the freedom that is formulated in respect to a certain situation (and concrete circumstances). In other words: the abstract freedom that inhibits us has first to find a concrete formulation that efficiently renders it, and only this rejection of a concrete (embodied) form of abstract freedom can eventually put us on the path of a concrete freedom. We do not arrive at concrete freedom simply by rejecting/abolishing the abstract freedom but by saying *no* to a concrete existence of this abstract freedom. The doctor’s suggestion (“you are free to smoke”) effectively exposes the limits of the abstract freedom in this case: the impossibility masked by the (false) alternative, or choice, between smoking and not smoking. For this choice is clearly not what is at stake for Zeno: he is repeating the very failure of this alternative to capture what is at stake. The imperative to smoke and the imperative to quit smoking come from the same source, from the same structural place, and they effectively protect each other (and sustain the active core of repression). In a similar way, the abstract freedom as freedom of choice is the very form of existence of an *imperative*: for example, the freedom to choose between different products is the form of existence of the imperative to buy...

At the end, Zeno believes that it was not the therapy but the fact that he ended it that finally cured him. And he is quite right. However, far from casting a very dubious light on the practice of analysis leading to this ending, the fact that he was miraculously cured the moment he stopped going to analysis is perhaps rather a showcase of a successful analysis. This, at least, would be one possible reading. For could we not say that Zeno’s obsession with ending (the idea that he *has to stop* smoking—which, and not the smoking itself, was the core of his pathology) has been successfully transformed into transference neurosis? The latter is defined by Freud as an artificial illness that takes place as a direct continuation of the “inaugural” illness, with all the characteristics of the inaugural illness, except that—since it is acted out in the conditions of transference and in relation to the analyst—it is entirely accessible to analytic interventions.

At some point, Zeno actually spells out the fact that he has entered the transference neurosis. Ridden with doubt that, after he spent a lot of time in analysis, he is still not any

⁴ Svevo, *Zeno’s Conscience*, 414.

⁵ Svevo, *Zeno’s Conscience*, 418.

closer to health, he writes: “to tell the truth, I believe that, with his [the doctor’s] help, in studying my consciousness, I have introduced some new sicknesses into it.”⁶

Indeed, very much so, but this is precisely what is supposed to happen. And it is easier to shake off this new sickness because one can in fact intervene in it. In doing so efficiently, however, the inaugural sickness also disappears, or loses its ground. This—at least, and roughly put—is the theory. And this seems to be what happens to Zeno: he stops/ends his analysis and, as if most naturally, he also stops smoking (or rather: he stops ending it, and hence stops doing it). With ending his analysis Zeno most literally *repeats the end* (by repeating its artificial model); he repeats the “other” end, the end that he kept repeating without repeating it, the end that he kept repeating “in vain.”

He ends smoking by ending something else (to which his passion for ending became attached). He could not have ended it directly, by simply “fully carrying through” his original attempt at ending it...

Zeno was only able to “abolish the freedom that foolish doctor chose to grant him” by rejecting, throwing out, the enjoyment binding him to the imperative (both to smoke and to quit). The doctor successfully disassociated this enjoyment from the signifying dyad (smoking/quitting) that sustained it and has become himself the embodiment of this enjoyment and hence its refuse.

Put this way, this sounds a lot like Lacan’s well known comparison of the position of the analyst to that of a saint:

A saint’s business, to put it clearly, is not *caritas*. Rather, he acts like trash [*déchet*]; his business is *trashitas* [*il décharite*]. So as to embody what the structure entails, namely allowing the subject, the subject of the unconscious, to take his as the cause of subject’s own desire. In fact, it is through the abjection of this cause that the subject in question has a chance to be aware of his position, at least within the structure. [...] the saint is the refuse of *jouissance*.⁷

However.

However, Zeno’s memoirs continue, and the concluding part (the last entry) introduces a new perspective, which forces us to ask whether this really is the right reading or whether it is rather that Zeno’s ending his analysis was a showcase of “acting out” and not of a successful analysis? In which case the analyst would be very right in insisting that analysis was only interrupted and in no way concluded. (He is trying to lure Zeno, a businessman, back to analysis with a business proposition: if Zeno returns to analysis, he is willing to share with him the “lavish profits” he expects to make from publishing Zeno’s memoirs...)

To what does the concept of *acting out* refer? It refers to the way in which the subject stages, performs, the core of his symptom in a flagrant way, but without noticing it. In one of his essays, Lacan gives a very nice example of *acting out* involving a patient whose analyst is convinced he has just successfully cured the patient of his obsession with plagiarism, that is, with stealing other people’s ideas, by simply serving him his explanation of it. The patient reacted to this explanation with the following remark:

⁶ Svevo, *Zeno’s Conscience*, 417.

⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Television*, ed. Joan Copjec (New York: Norton, 1990), 16.

“Every noon, when I leave here, before luncheon, and before returning to my office, I walk through X Street (a street well known for its small but attractive restaurants) and I look at the menus in the windows. In one of the restaurants I usually find my preferred dish—fresh brains.”⁸

The fact that the subject does not at all “hear” what he is saying here clearly indicates for Lacan that the core of repression remains fully operative. And, as a matter of fact, the concluding part of the memoirs of a now supposedly cured Zeno contains a very similar configuration.

Zeno reflects on life in general and on the direction it is heading, and he predicts that sickness and the sick will prosper and flourish with the help of “devices” (existing outside our body). Devices, he writes, are bought, sold, and stolen, and man becomes increasingly shrewd and weaker. His first devices seemed to be extensions of his arm and could not be effective without its strength; but, by now, the device no longer has any relation to the limb. And it is the device that creates sickness, abandoning the law of the strongest, and so “we lost healthful selection.” Zeno goes on to suggest that it would take much more than psychoanalysis to cure this sickness. Actually, it would take no less than an unheard-of catastrophe, it would take no less than the end of the world. This is the concluding paragraph of the novel:

Perhaps, through an unheard-of catastrophe produced by devices, we will return to health. When poison gases no longer suffice, an ordinary man, in the secrecy of a room in this world, will invent an incomparable explosive, compared to which the explosives currently in existence will be considered harmless toys. And another man, also ordinary, but a bit sicker than others, will steal this explosive and will climb up at the center of the earth, to set it on the spot where it can have the maximum effect. There will be an enormous explosion that no one will hear, and the earth, once again a nebula, will wander through the heavens, freed of parasites and sickness.⁹

This, indeed, is an illustrious acting out with respect to Zeno’s inaugural obsession with cigarettes, sickness, and health. (And the fact that he may be right, on the factual level, changes nothing about this.) Zeno’s obsession with health, sickness, and ending reappears here on a whole new scale. What is particularly interesting about this conclusion, however, is how perfectly it resonates with much of what we could call the “intellectual climate” of our times. The theme of the end, of total extinction, or at least the disappearance of what we call human beings, has an imposing presence. The fact that there are *real* causes of concern here (if concern it is) in no way contradicts the fantasmatic character of many of these representations of the end. What I mean by this is that the idea of even the most radical, definitive, irreversible End serves as a framework through which we contemplate (and interpret) our *present* reality; and it often serves as means of its ideological consolidation. It serves, first, to give us an idea of just *how much* is needed to change our present reality, that is, it provides a spectacular answer to the question: what has to end in order for our present troubles to end? And from there, we

⁸ Jacques Lacan, “Response to Jean Hyppolite’s Commentary on Freud’s ‘Verneinung,’” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 331.

⁹ Svevo, *Zeno’s Conscience*, 437.

can have our pick: we can either decide that we prefer nothing to change (since change and catastrophe are one and the same), or else we can find consolation in the fact that it will “all be taken care of” anyway (by this catastrophe). And then something new perhaps can begin—this is the “optimist” twist, the silver lining of the catastrophe scenarios as potential scenarios of emancipation.

In the introduction to his book, Ruda evokes Fredric Jameson’s suggestion that people today can more easily imagine the earth being hit by a comet than a radical transformation of the fundamental (socio-political, but also economic) coordinates of our daily life. Things will never really change from within, only a radical catastrophe can save us from ourselves. Which is also why there is a significant ambivalence surrounding the expectations of such an end, and many choose to cheer the prospect of some kind of catastrophe, the prospect of total extinction.

It is perhaps here that we should fully apply Ruda’s principle and ingenious formula and say: But wait, it has already happened (at least once)! We don’t even need to pretend (act *as if*) it’s already happened. The earth has once been but a nebula, completely free of sickness and of humans and of their problems and devices—and look where this had lead it! In other words, is this apocalyptic scenario, this perspective of “radical extinction,” not perhaps too optimistic? What if in fact nothing, not even the prospect of total extinction, can *guarantee* a way out? There is no guarantee that this scenario cannot be repeated or that, indeed, what we are living today is not already a repetition....

To say that, very often, the prospect of catastrophe is a typical fantasy scenario does not mean that the catastrophe is a fantasy. In other words, we have to distinguish the actual possibility that it will all end up in some sort of planetary catastrophe from the end of our present *troubles* as a (future) possibility.

Very much like Zeno, we seem to be delegating the change, the end of our troubles, to another End (which will take care of it all in one go). To be sure, this kind of “orientation in thinking” is to be taken very seriously, for it is a real symptom, a symptom of the utter impotence that we experience as social and political subjects to intervene in the course of events and in their structuring. This impotence is quite real, and it is certainly not about us being too “lazy” to actually do something about it, here and now. But the fact that this impotence is real (and structural) should not let us confuse it with the kind of structural necessity that could only be dealt with in the form of the end of it all.

So perhaps we could conclude by adding to Ruda’s list of “comically fatalist” attitudes another one:

The world will surely end, but it won’t be the end of our troubles.