

The Chain Factory

Ōsugi Sakae

1913

Late one night I awoke with a start and found myself in a strange place.

As far as I could see there were countless people busily working away at something. They are fashioning chains.

The fellow beside me wrapped a rather long length of chain around himself and passed one end of it to the chap beside him. The second fellow lengthened the chain further, wrapped it around himself and, once again, passed it to another chap sitting diagonally from him. While this is happening,¹ the first chap takes the end of another chain from the fellow beside him, and, as before, lengthens it and wraps it once around himself, and then passes the end to the chap sitting diagonally from him. This goes on and on, with everyone doing the same thing, and at a dizzying pace.

All of them have chains wrapped around their midsections ten to twenty times, and at first glance it seems that they are completely immobilized, but their hands and feet are free enough to forge the chain and wrap it around their bodies. They work so intently. There isn't a sign of bother on any of their faces. They actually look happy as they work.

But all is not what it seems. Ten paces from me a chap shouted something as he tossed away the end of a chain. But then, another fellow, who was standing near, but also with chains wrapped around his body, gruffly approached him and clubbed him three or four times with the large truncheon he was carrying. Everyone near the clubbed chap cried out in glee. The clubbed chap, crying, picks up the end of the chain, fashions a small link and joins it, forges another link, and joins that one. And after a while, the tears on his face had all dried away.

In places there are slightly more refined men – standing, once again, with chains wrapped around their midsections – talking incessantly in shrill voices, like what one would hear from a phonograph. They speak at length with difficult words and complicated reasoning, saying something to the effect of 'the chains protect us; the chains are a sacred object that frees us.' Everyone listens intently.

And in the middle of this expansive factory are a group splendid-looking fellows—perhaps the family that owns this factory—lounging on sofas, smoking what seem to be cigars. Their smoke rings sometimes gently waft past the faces of the workers, making them choke uncomfortably.

As I dwelt upon how strange this place was, I felt my own joints begin to ache. I look down to find my own body wrapped ten to twenty times in chains. I busily attend to linking the chains. I was also, as is to be expected, another worker at this factory.

I cursed myself; I grew saddened, and then angry. I remembered the words of Hegel: “The real is the rational, and the rational is the real.”

Wilhelm I and his loyal subjects interpreted these words as granting philosophy’s sanction to all the political realities of the day, including the despotic government, the police state, the arbitrary courts and the suppression of free speech.

Not just the political realities, but everything. For the dim-witted Prussian people, all of those realities were, without a doubt, necessary and just.

As I cast the chains and bind myself with them, their reality is unavoidable; it is just, and it is my own fate.

I must cease the casting of my own chains. I must cease the binding of my body. I must break the chains that bind me. I must also create a new self, a new reality, a new sense of justice, a new fate.

The chains that bound my mind were rather much easier to break than I had believed. Yet the chains around my feet and hands dig tenaciously into my flesh, and, with time, down to my bones; even the slightest touch left me in agony. Yet as I endured, the chains relented somewhat. And as time passed, that pain was accompanied by a slight sense of satisfaction. I even began to tolerate the three to four truncheon blows from the fellow on watch. I eventually got to the point that I gladly accepted the taunting and abuse from the lounging men.

However, there were many chains that, try as I might, I could not break alone. Everyone’s chain is cleverly linked with mine. There is nothing I can do. If I at all grew idle, the chains that I had taken great pains to loosen subtly worked their way around my body again. Before I knew it, I found my hands mending the links of my own chain.

The master of the factory holds the keys to our bellies, and by wielding them, he moves our feet and hands. I had always thought that it was my own mind that controlled my feet and hands; how mistaken I was. As far as I look, no one controls their feet and hands with their own mind. Everyone is under the complete control of the master holding the keys to our bellies. It sounds so foolish, but the fact is there is nothing we can do.

I then thought I would try to get back the key to my belly from the man holding it. But it was an impossible task to snatch it away from him by myself. It turns out that he holds my key in such a clever way that it is interlocked with everyone else’s keys, and I cannot possibly snatch my own key away from him without the others’.

He is also surrounded by many guards. They all have chains wrapped around their torsos, as they stand holding their spears and bows. They are a frightening bunch and I dare not approach them.

I had lost almost all hope. Then I shifted my gaze to the fellows around me.

There are so many who do not realize that they are bound by chains. There are many more still who, were they to realize it, would only be grateful for their chains. There are also many who, while not grateful, have resigned themselves to working industriously to forge their chains. And there are the many who, seeing the chain-making as ridiculous, frequently find openings in the watch of the guards to rest their bodies while harbouring selfish delusions in their heads and passionately spouting nonsense about actually being free and not bound by chains at all. It is more foolish than I can bear to watch.

I then suddenly cast my gaze about. I found others around me that seemed to be aligned with me.

They are few, and they are scattered all around. But they all desire the key to their bellies in the clutches of the master. And like me, they seem to be aware of being unable to take back their keys alone, so they whisper frequently to their neighbours to forge alliances.

“They are few; we are many. They are outnumbered. If we act together, we can take back our keys in one fell swoop.”

“However, since we make pronouncements about justice and peace, we must not permit violence. We must proceed through peaceful means. There is a simple way to do this.”

“Once a year, we send a representative to the master to decide every aspect of our lives. All of those chaps in that meeting are representatives of the master, and if we muster up our own true representatives now, we can be the majority in the meeting, and that’s how we can pass the resolutions that we want.”

“All we need to do is shut up and forge the chains. Just continue to wrap the chains around ourselves. Then, when the day comes every few years that we choose our representative, we simply vote for our own representative.”

“Our representative will gradually loosen our chains, and will, ultimately, take back the key to our bellies from the master. We will then find ourselves in a factory under a new organization and a new system of our own ideals, with our chains in the hands of our representative.”

For a time, I thought this to be the soundest argument. But the idea of relying simply on numbers, or relying on someone else over myself, did not sit right with me somehow. And when they declared their philosophy to be scientific, I then realized that they were not my comrades.

They are dreadful Panlogists.² Dreaded mechanical fatalists. In their ideal of the new organization of the factory, they believe themselves to be the natural inheritors of the current factory organization, the result of an inevitable economic process. Thus, their belief is vested in simply changing the factory system and organization according to economic processes.

When pushed to decide, I, myself, am also a Panlogist. I am a mechanical fatalist. But there are a great many unknowns in my thinking, in my mechanical fatalism. As long as I do not discern these unknowns, the achievement of my ideals will not be inevitable. They will remain probabilities with a degree of potential. I cannot look optimistically to the future like these men. In fact, my pessimism about the future is what nourishes my efforts in the present.

The larger part of what I refer to as unknown is located in humans themselves. It is with the development of life itself. It is with the power of life itself. More specifically, it lies with the efforts to realize one’s potential, to realize one’s autonomy, to struggle tirelessly for that development, and all of the effort put into that struggle.

I have no doubt that economic processes are a major force in determining the future of our factory. Yet those unknowns—more specifically, our power and efforts—shape what kind of organization and system should be brought about as a result of those processes. Whether it be an organization or a system, these are merely phenomena manifested from the interactions of human beings. The interaction of nothing with nothing—the relationship between nothing and nothing—will, ultimately, be nothing.

And yet, I cannot help but shudder in fear at what might rightly be called the omnipotence of the organizations and systems that already exist today. Those fellows in the factory, steeped in a dream within a dream, consider themselves to be complete individuals and give not a moment’s thought to the destruction of those systems.

Sloth has no ambition. Sloth makes no history.

I looked around myself once again.

I am surrounded almost entirely by sloth. They work dutifully fashioning chains and wrapping them around their own bodies, under the full control of the mind of another; almost not a single one moves of his own mental faculties. It matters not how many of these fellows are brought together, for they have no ambition, no creative power.

I have given up on this vulgar group.

My hopes rested on myself alone. They rested only on the scant minority that come to realize their own power and autonomy, go through their own revolutions to some extent, and put forth all they can to achieve their own betterment.

We must face the men who hold the keys to our bellies, look upon the organization and system of the factory they have created to subjugate us, and turn on it like wild beasts.

We will likely be a scant minority until the bitter end. Yet we will have the initiative and we will make the effort. And we will also have the experience of actions born of this effort. Our aspirations will be born from this experience. We will fight to the last.

This struggle is a demonstration of our power. It is the touchstone of our personal autonomy. We are the magnets who draw the slothful within our sphere of influence and transform them into warriors.

This struggle yields new meaning and new power within our lives, and germinates the seed of the new factory we are trying to construct.

Well, I've relied too much on argument alone. Arguments don't break chains. Arguments don't snatch back the keys to our bellies.

The chains draw ever tighter around us now. The keys to our bellies are ever more difficult to turn. Even the slothful among this vulgar group begin to grow restless. The time for the efforts of the conscious, combative minority is now. I threw off the chains wrapped around my hands and feet, and stood up.

I awoke. The night had passed, and the mid-August morning sun shines on my half-asleep countenance.

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