

# **Play and Interruption as a Mode of Action in Arendt, Dostoevsky, and Kharms**

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## ABSTRACT

This essay uses Hannah Arendt's theory of action and her critique of modern politics to explore the themes of predictability and unpredictability in human affairs, and the political meaning of interruption and refusal. It draws on the life and literature of the Russian avant-gardist, Daniil Kharms (1905-1942), alongside Fyodor Dostoevsky and several contemporary theorists, to offer a reading of action as taking the form, specifically, of *playful* interruption and *generative* refusal. A marginal figure whose deeds and writings were disruptively strange, Kharms is taken as an exemplar of action in this ludic mode. This serves to elaborate upon Arendt's concepts of plurality and natality, while challenging some weaknesses in her theory of action as a whole.

Keywords:  
Hannah Arendt;  
Daniil Kharms;  
Fyodor Dostoevsky;  
action;  
plurality;  
natality;  
interruption;  
play;  
surprise;  
happiness

## Play and Interruption as a Mode of Action in Arendt, Dostoevsky, and Kharms\*

According to Hannah Arendt, “Action, though it may have a definite beginning, never...has a predictable end.”<sup>1</sup> Action can never have a predictable end because of two related conditions of our shared human life: plurality—that we share the world with others who are different from us, and natality—the constant emergence of the new. This essay is an exploration of the implications of these concepts of plurality and natality for how we understand our social and political selves, which is to say, the perennial question of what it means to be human.

I wish to enter, however, through a side door, by quoting some paragraphs of the American poet, Anne Boyer, from an essay on the theme of refusal:

Saying nothing is a preliminary method of saying *no*. To practice unspeaking is to practice being unbending, more so in a crowd. Cicero wrote... ‘in silence they clamour’—and he was right: never mistake silence for agreement. Silence is as often conspiracy as it is consent...

Sometimes our refusal is in our staying put. We perfect the loiter before we perfect the hustle. Like every toddler, each of us once let all adult commotion move around our

small bodies as we inspected clover or floor tile. As teens we loitered, too, required Security to dislodge us, like how once in a country full of freely roaming dogs, I saw the primary occupation of the police was to try to keep the dogs out of the public fountains, and as the cops had moved the dogs from the fountains, a new group of dogs had moved in. ...

Some days my only certain *we* is this certain *we* that didn’t, that wouldn’t, whose bodies or spirits wouldn’t go along. That we slowed, stood around, blocked the way, kept a stone face when the others were complicit and smiling. And still we ghost, and no-show, and in the enigma of refusal, we find that we endogenously produce our own incapacity to even try, grow sick and depressed and motionless under all the merciless and circulatory conditions of all the capitalist yes and just can’t, even if we thought we really wanted to. This is as if a river, who saw the scale of the levees, decided that rather than try to exceed them, it would outwit them by drying up.<sup>2</sup>

This essay is about human action as something which in its consequences and effects is inherently unpredictable,

but it will include as a central theme a reading of action as including generative acts of refusal. I am, moreover, particularly interested in action and refusal as relating to, and taking the form of, interruption. Indeed, a major reason I am leading with Arendt is because her account of action provides a framework within which to think of interruption – the intrusion of the unplanned and unexpected – generously and as something other than an enemy. Later in the essay from which I quoted above, Anne Boyer writes that “there is a lot of room for a meaning inside a ‘no’ spoken in the tremendous logic of a refused order of the world.”<sup>3</sup> Incipient in that sentence is the idea of an affirmative mode of negation: of generative refusal, refusal that creates room for something new. Saying no can of course be an awfully poe-faced thing; refusals can be puritanical, they can be haughty, they can be pious and deadly serious. In order to escape that sort of mood, I will focus my attention on refusals and interruptions that take a ludic and ridiculous form, that is, that contain with them a spirit of playfulness (*ludere*) and laughter (*ridere*).

Arendt will, therefore, provide the conceptual foundations of the essay, and the first section comprises a reading of her categories of labour, work, and action, and of plurality and natality, as they relate to my major themes of

\* Particular thanks to Boris Gunjević for introducing me to Daniil Kharms, Christian Coppa for many relevant conversations, and attendees at the D Society, Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge, where the first version of this essay was delivered and extensively discussed in March 2019.

1. Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action,” 175.

2. Boyer, 10-11.

3. Ibid. 16.

predictability and interruption.<sup>4</sup> This forms the ground to develop, in part two, Arendt's critique of modern politics as having become a sphere of fabrication rather than of action, investigating some of her comments on utopianism so as to apply them to the contemporary 'politics of happiness', as recently evaluated by William Davies. In the final two sections, I will turn to Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, itself a satirical response to a fabricatory and utopian 'happiness politics' of his own day, and the work of the lesser-known Russian avant-gardist, Daniil Kharmis, who lived, worked, and died under utopian Stalinism, for instances of the kinds of playful, interruptive, but generative refusal I have in mind. Indeed, Kharmis will become for me a somewhat ridiculous but instructive exemplar of Arendtian action in such a mode. His example is instructive because, as an unquestionably marginal figure of minor historical importance, he challenges aspects of Arendt's analysis that, as numerous scholars have acknowledged, tend in an elitist direction. The essay will conclude with a discussion around this particular problem.

What follows is in some respects an exercise in 'serious play', but with the aim of illuminating dimensions of being-human that are of pressing theoretical and practical importance.

### I. Action and the work of modern politics

Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* offers an original account of what it means to be human in the form of a phenomenological existentialism. That is, Arendt explores the human condition by describing the various modes of being-in-the-world that are available to humans in the different spheres of their existence. She makes two important critical moves at the outset. The first is to challenge the traditional hierarchy that

sees the *vita activa* as subordinate to the higher ends of the *vita contemplativa*. She contends that for a long time the active life was defined from the viewpoint of contemplation, by people who were themselves engaged in contemplation; from this view, all activity appears similar, such that the various distinctions that can be found within the active life disappear.<sup>5</sup> Against this, she seeks to re-emphasise and explore fully the various dimensions of the active life, breaking these down into three categories, which form an ascending hierarchy: labour, work, and action. A second move Arendt makes is against modern political thought, which she admits has re-emphasised human activity, but she thinks in a wrong-headed way. Here she has in mind figures including Smith, Locke, and Marx, whom she accuses of having privileged labour and work, while forgetting about action. This critical move in relation to modern thought is central to the concerns of this essay, but in order to understand its significance we must better understand Arendt's three categories of labour, work, and action.

Labour covers the most basic forms of activity required to sustain life. "By labouring," Arendt says, "men produce the vital necessities that must be fed into the life process of the human body."<sup>6</sup> This can include forms of industrial mass production where what is being produced is for consumption, and so for the sustenance of biological life. Since the human life process is cyclical—eat, digest, expel, eat— "labouring activity never comes to an end as long as life lasts; it is endlessly repetitive."<sup>7</sup> This cyclical pattern means that labouring activity is characterised by *futility*; it leaves nothing lasting behind but simply sustains mortal life until death.

The distinction Arendt then makes between labour and work is novel. While she acknowledges Marx as the

great modern theorist of labour, she nevertheless considers him to have conflated these two categories. For Arendt, whereas labour concerns activity that devours in order to sustain biological life, work produces durable things that have an existence independent from that of their maker. Work, she writes, "does not prepare matter for incorporation but changes it into material in order to work upon it and use the finished product."<sup>8</sup> Work concerns acts of making and fabrication, and she has in mind mundane objects like tables, or buildings, or bridges, as well as more abstract objects like a poem or a piece of music, as long as those are recorded (written down). Together, these durable things comprise the objective world within which humans live. Whereas labour has a cyclical relation to time and is something that all animals engage in, work is distinctively human and has a linear relation to time, because it brings things into existence that can outlast their maker. Work in that sense (like action), opens to mortal human life the possibility of immortality.<sup>9</sup>

Work is also undertaken in order to achieve or produce something else rather than for its own sake: it is instrumental and utilitarian. It separates means from ends and tends to turn today's ends into tomorrow's means for something else. Arendt is not opposed to utilitarian reasoning and activity within its proper sphere, but she strongly criticises what she calls, "the generalization of the fabrication experience in which usefulness and utility are established as the ultimate standards for the world as well as for the life of acting men moving in it."<sup>10</sup> According to Arendt, if there weren't action as well as work, then the totalisation of utilitarian logic would lead to the instrumentalisation of the entire world, something that would doom us to meaninglessness, since utilitarian thinking alone can never

4. I have carefully delimited my discussion to her writings that deal most directly with labour, work, and action, and the principles of plurality and natality, as I do not intend this essay to be an exercise in 'Arendt exegesis', but rather a creative development upon some of her most fertile concepts.

5. Arendt, "Labor, Work, Action," 168.

6. Arendt, "Labor, Work, Action," 170.

7. *Ibid.*, 171.

8. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 100.

9. Cf. Voice, 40, 46.

10. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 157. Emphasis added.

provide an answer to the question, “what is the use of use?”<sup>11</sup>

Arendt charges modern political thought with having elevated labour and work, and neglected action. However, that is not quite all, because she also says, as a result, that our political life itself has come to be understood in terms of labour and work. This is a significant move. Where politics is conceived in terms of labour, she explains, human affairs become dominated by the cyclical satisfaction of material wants and needs – that is, by *consumption*. Arendt calls this political orientation, somewhat mysteriously, “the social,” and describes it as “an interpretation that takes into account nothing but the life process of mankind, and within its frame of reference all things become objects of consumption.”<sup>12</sup> This is Arendt’s critique of consumer society, and where she comes closest, critically speaking, to Marx and the familiar idea of universal commodification. More original is her notion of political life being understood as work, that is, as a kind of making or fabrication. Here, political activity comes to be seen in terms of constructing a desirable condition of society, as if a state of human affairs could be the end result of a production process. Arendt speaks here of the “delusion that we can ‘make’ something in the realm of human affairs – make institutions or laws, for instance, as we make tables and chairs, or make men ‘better’ or ‘worse.’”<sup>13</sup> This can align with the kind of consumerist society just described, where the goal might be the ‘production’ of material wellbeing, or it could be oriented towards a higher

end—the production of some eternal moral good. This is politics conceived technocratically: instrumental reason, acting upon the human world as if it were dead matter. It also allies politics with violence. As Margaret Canovan has summarised:

Work is a matter of transforming material in order to make something: domination, violence and the sacrifice of the means to the end are inherent in the activity of fabrication. When this model is applied to politics, which is concerned with dealings between plural persons, it is other people who become the material to be dealt with violently and sacrificed to the end that is to be achieved.<sup>14</sup>

Marx understood politics this way, Arendt argues, but inherited his view from a longer tradition, running as far back as Plato and Aristotle.<sup>15</sup> Arendt also closely associates this way of thinking with utopianism, something we will return to in the next section. For Arendt, it constitutes a kind of category error because it confuses the human world with the material world.<sup>16</sup> It assumes that one can treat people, can shape them, as one would any other form of matter.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, it assumes that human affairs can have that same level of solidity and predictability as do processes of production.

Here we arrive at a central theme: for Arendt, work processes can be made predictable. Under normal conditions, one can establish stable causative relations between means and ends, and these

can be managed and rationalised and optimised. This is not so with that form of activity that she regards as proper to the political realm: action.” Though it may have a definite beginning,” Arendt writes, “[Action] never...has a predictable end.”<sup>18</sup> She speaks of the “inherent unpredictability” of action.<sup>19</sup> Its consequences and effects cannot be controlled, cannot be planned for, in anything like the sense that the consequences and effects of *fabricating* activity can be controlled and planned for. This absence of control is fundamental to what Arendt calls the “frailty of human affairs.”<sup>20</sup>

Arendt’s category of action is one of the most original and dynamic contributions to Western political and social thought in the last century. Defining the term concisely is difficult because of Arendt’s descriptive, phenomenological method, and the fact that she does not give a litany of practical examples of what action looks like. Nor is she seeking to lay out a regulative, institutional framework for action in modern public life in the manner of other major political theorists.<sup>21</sup> Action, first, includes a revival of the antique notion of *praxis*—it is *political action*, but not in the bureaucratic sense in which we tend to think about political activity today. Action is, rather, a “mode of human togetherness”—it is participatory.<sup>22</sup> Second, Arendt distinguishes the sphere of action from the private, domestic sphere, but also the sphere of the ‘social’ that I mentioned above in relation to consumer society. The modern ‘social’ is, for Arendt, fundamentally homogenising—it has been described as a “blob”—

11. Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action,” 177.

12. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 89.

13. *Ibid.*, 188.

14. Canovan, Hannah Arendt, 73.

15. *Ibid.*, 72ff; cf. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 196, 225.

16. e.g. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 225-247.

17. *Ibid.*, 188.

18. Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action,” 175.

19. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 191.

20. *Ibid.*, 188ff.

21. For example, John Rawls. The closest she comes is to talk about an elaborate, tiered council system (cf. Voice, 51n3).

22. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 180. “The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be” (*Ibid.*, 198).

whereas the sphere of action is one of plurality, of individual differentiation.<sup>23</sup> Third, action is undertaken by a person. This point may seem banal, but Arendt distinguishes between what humans are, as biological organisms and members of a species, and who they are as particular people. People, she says, are “unique, unexchangeable, unrepeatable,”<sup>24</sup> and “in acting and speaking,” people “show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world.”<sup>25</sup> Thus for Arendt, individual persons are unique, and when they act their uniqueness is disclosed. However, and this is a fourth point, that disclosure is only intelligible as such within a context—that is, a shared context, which she calls the “space of appearance.”<sup>26</sup> Action therefore happens under the gaze of others; it is performative. *There are no strictly private actions:* to act is always to act into an already-existing web of relationships.

Arendt’s emphasis on uniqueness and disclosure is existentialist in flavour but this is not an existentialism for which the individual is, as it were, folded in on themselves. It is not the case, as with a common image of Sartrean existentialism, for example, that the individual for Arendt is able simply to choose and assert their identity, to unilaterally decide what to be. To think one can merely assert who one is would be nonsensical, for Arendt, for the simple reason that we are none of us alone, and therefore do not act in isolation. To act *freely* is nevertheless always also to act *into* that pre-existing web of relationships that she describes, which is made up of conflicting wills and intentions.<sup>27</sup> It is for that reason, among others, that action can never have a ‘predictable end’. The ultimate meaning

of any action—no matter how forcefully enacted—depends on the reciprocal actions of others through time. That is, it emerges diachronically and—Arendt does not use this term, but I consider it accurate—dialogically. Indeed, Arendt frequently relates speech and action, because the meaning and effects of something that is said in the hearing of others depends, in the same sort of way, on how it is heard, interpreted, responded to by those others—others who are different from the speaker, and over whom in a free society the speaker does not have control. This is what Arendt means by *plurality*. The fact of plurality means that we cannot dictate in advance the final meaning of what we do or say, and this is one of the ways action is distinguished from work, or acts of fabrication, for which the finished product lies within our control. These ideas come together in one lyrical passage:

Since we always act into a web of relationships, the consequences of each deed are boundless, every action touches off not only a reaction but a chain reaction, every process is the cause of unpredictable new processes. This boundlessness is inescapable; it could not be cured by restricting one’s acting to a limited graspable framework of circumstances or by feeding all pertinent material into giant computers. The smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness and unpredictability; one deed, one gesture, one word may suffice to change every constellation. In acting, in contradistinction to working, it is indeed true that we can really never know what we are doing.<sup>28</sup>

Arendt says that to do and to suffer the deeds of others are two sides of the same coin. The interaction of those elements through time is what will determine the meaning of what we do, and any final meaning can only be told, she says, at the end, in the form of a story.<sup>29</sup>

The counterpart to plurality in dictating the unpredictability and frailty of human affairs is Arendt’s concept of natality, by which she simply means a capacity to give birth to the new.<sup>30</sup> For Arendt, what is special about action is that it is capable of bringing something unanticipated into the world. She writes, “Action, with all its uncertainties, is like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin something new.” This has a very literal sense, in terms of the continual entry of new generations into human history, which causes no end of interruption and disruption. She writes,

Limitations and boundaries exist within the realm of human affairs, but they never offer a framework that can reliably withstand the onslaught with which each new generation must insert itself. The frailty of human institutions and laws and, generally, of all matters pertaining to men’s living together, arises from the human condition of natality and is quite independent of the frailty of human nature.<sup>31</sup>

The same force of natality that births new generations is taken up and repeated in the actions of already-living people, which Arendt describes as “like a second birth,” resulting in the perpetual introduction into the world of new, surprising beginnings.<sup>32</sup> She describes this in terms of an ‘onslaught’: it has something of the

23. Fenichel Pitkin.

24. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 97.

25. *Ibid.*, 179.

26. e.g. *Ibid.*, 198-99.

27. *Ibid.*, 190.

28. Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action,” 180; cf. *Human Condition*, 190.

29. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 192.

30. Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action,” 181.

31. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 191.

32. *Ibid.*, 177.

irrepressible about it, a sense of life that teems. "It is in the nature of beginning," she writes, "that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before."<sup>33</sup> Action therefore always appears "in the guise of a miracle" (and we return to the theme of miracle in relation to Kharms, below).<sup>34</sup> But it is also here about rupture: life that erupts into history, and which *interrupts* and *disrupts* the best-laid plans and designs of people.<sup>35</sup> With these dual concepts of plurality and natality, Arendt rejects any political orientation that would treat human behaviour as reducible to a predictable, objective schema. The human capacity to act makes inevitable the *interruption* and *disruption* of any such programme.<sup>36</sup>

## II. Fabrication and utopia

The conditions of plurality and natality contribute to what Arendt calls the "extraordinary frailty and unreliability of strictly human affairs."<sup>37</sup> This gives rise to a political temptation: to try to eliminate that frailty and unreliability by treating human affairs as a domain of fabrication rather than of action. Arendt writes in this regard of the:

...depth of the authentic perplexities inherent in the human capacity for action and the strength of the temptation to eliminate its risks and dangers by introducing into the web of human relationships the much more reliable and solid categories

inherent in activities with which we confront nature and build the world of the human artifice.<sup>38</sup>

She also writes of the "attempt to eliminate action because of its uncertainty and to save human affairs from their frailty by dealing with them as though they were or could become the planned products of human making..."<sup>39</sup> Arendt associates this tendency with utopian thought. I have already written that for Arendt, the elision of political action with work or fabrication springs from the delusion "that we can 'make' something in the realm of human affairs – make institutions or laws, for instance, as we make tables and chairs, or make men 'better' or 'worse'." She continues in the same passage to link this to a, "conscious despair of all action...coupled with the utopian hope that it may be possible to treat men as one treats other material" (this despair of all action is because action cannot offer the same level of control over human material as that of which fabricatory programmes dream.)<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere she describes utopian schemes as "among the most efficient vehicles to conserve and develop a tradition of political thinking in which, consciously or unconsciously, the concept of action was interpreted in terms of making and fabrication."<sup>41</sup>

Utopianism is of course most commonly associated with revolutionary socialism and communism.<sup>42</sup> As such, it is commonly held that with the fall of the Soviet Union, utopianism definitively had

its day, especially in the light of the fact that in the one remaining major communist regime - China - markets and private property are now well-established. In this sense, Fukuyama's famous 'end of history' pronouncement (now retracted) also marked the end of utopias.<sup>43</sup> History seemed to have reached an equilibrium in the global hegemony of democratic free market liberalism. This is the sense in which the late Mark Fisher spoke of capitalist realism, a term that reflected the "widespread sense that not only is capitalism [now] the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it."<sup>44</sup> Insofar as utopianism concerns the imagining of alternative futures, this would indeed seem to mark its death knell.

However, the view that utopianism is dead ascribes that tradition too narrowly to a certain kind of Leftist thought. By contrast, as the institutionalist economist Geoffrey Hodgson has explained, "[while] utopian thinking is typically associated with socialism and communism...the contrasting politico-economic schemes of pro-market libertarians can equally be described as utopian."<sup>45</sup> Hodgson carefully elaborates why this is the case, to do with the imagining of a pure and perfectly efficient free market system. While many pro-market economists might well protest at this idea, it is not a wholly contentious point; Friedrich Hayek, of all people, readily admitted the role of a utopian or ideal picture of soci-

33. *Ibid.*, 177-178.

34. *Ibid.*, cf. 247.

35. This is not to say that miracle and rupture are simply one. Miracle can be conceived variously.

36. I will not develop this theme here, but the unpredictability attendant upon action gives great importance to what Arendt describes as the faculty of promise-making: "promises serves to set up in the ocean of future uncertainty islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would ever be possible in the relationships between men" (*Ibid.*, 181). Promise-making, in relation to the future, is the counterpart to the faculty of forgiving, which in relation to the past serves to "undo its deeds" (*ibid.*). Both are examples of action.

37. Arendt, "Labor, Work, Action," 180.

38. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 230.

39. *Ibid.*, 231.

40. *Ibid.*, 188.

41. *Ibid.*, 227-228.

42. Partly for this reason Arendt herself somewhat minimises the historical role of utopian projects, something I am departing from here.

43. Fukuyama, *End of History*.

44. Fisher, 2.

45. Hodgson, 5.

ety in his own thinking.<sup>46</sup> David Steele, another advocate of free markets, argued in 1992 that, “The attempt to abstain from utopianism merely leads to unexamined utopias.”<sup>47</sup> I am not claiming, *per se*, that this is a necessarily deleterious thing, either. As the late Zygmunt Bauman observed, the imagining of alternative political futures that do not yet exist can be a means of revitalising the present.<sup>48</sup> The danger comes, and here Arendt is again helpful, when that desirable political future becomes something to be fabricated in her specific sense. That is, when it is conceived as the predictable end result of a series of instrumental interventions on the human web of relationships, treating the latter “as one treats other material,” or as typical inputs in a production process.

While there may be several contenders for contemporary utopias in various stages of development, of particular relevance here is the politics of happiness and wellbeing analysed in William Davies’ *The Happiness Industry*. Reflecting on this phenomenon will serve both to clarify Arendt’s critique of modern political programmes of fabrication for our contemporary context and, because of the historical and thematic parallels, to illuminate our subsequent discussions of Dostoevsky and Kharms.<sup>49</sup>

The attempt to measure and maximise happiness has a long history in utilitarian thought, but the recent clamour across this issue in industry and government seems to be related to the belated realisation that unhappy people are less productive as well as expensive to treat and medicate. Davies’ text examines this history in light of contem-

porary attempts to develop an objective science of happiness as a “measurable, visible, improvable entity.”<sup>50</sup> He describes how new neuroscience claims to have identified “how happiness and unhappiness are physically inscribed in the brain,” and how happiness economists are using ever-growing accumulations of statistical data to ascertain, “which regions, lifestyles, forms of employment or types of consumption generate the greatest mental wellbeing.”<sup>51</sup> “Our hopes,” he writes, “are being strategically channelled into this quest for happiness, in an objective, measurable, administered sense.”<sup>52</sup> Davies explicitly describes this project as utopian.<sup>53</sup> He means ‘utopian’ in the simple pejorative sense that it is a pipe dream, albeit a dangerous one, but we can also interpret it as utopian in Arendt’s sense, as an attempt to fabricate a desirable political future. Davies argues, however, that to treat happiness in this way is to misunderstand that humans are social and relational beings who live, speak, and act *with others*, and not just biological entities. This too is of course consonant with Arendt. He focuses on our use of psychological language, including the word ‘happiness’, arguing after Wittgenstein that psychological attributes apply to the person *as a whole*.<sup>54</sup> An attribute like happiness does not lie *inside* someone, as a fact to be discovered, like their body temperature; rather,

I know what happiness means, because I know how to describe it in others, and to notice it in my own life. But this is an unusual type of language. If one ever believes that ‘happiness’ refers to an objective

thing, be it inside you, or inside me, I have misunderstood the word.<sup>55</sup>

The irony, Davies suggests, is that partly due to this error of spurious reduction, the happiness and wellbeing agenda may be generating the very conditions that it seeks to resolve, because it forms part of a wider socio-political culture that isolates and disempowers people.

The fundamental question is what it means for society, for politics or for personal life stories, to operate according to certain forms of psychological and neurological explanation. A troubling possibility is that it is precisely the behaviourist and medical view of the mind – as some sort of internal bodily organ or instrument which suffers silently – that locks us into the forms of passivity associated with depression and anxiety in the first place. A society designed to measure and manage fluctuations in pleasure and pain, as Bentham envisaged, may be set up for more instances of ‘mental breakdown’ than one designed to help people speak and participate.<sup>56</sup>

He argues that treating the mind or an individual brain as a kind of “decontextualised, independent entity” that fails internally, without reference to the material and social conditions under which such breakdowns occur, “is a symptom of the very culture that produces a great deal of unhappiness today” (one of political and economic disempowerment).<sup>57</sup> When combined with a stifling culture of competitive success and optimism, this cannot but produce the reverse of what

46. *Ibid.*, 8.

47. Steele, 375.

48. Bauman, 13; cf. Hodgson, 7-9.

49. In addition to Hodgson’s efficient market paradise (the realisation of which seems admittedly more distant than a few decades ago), one could mention the bureaucratic utopia explored in David Graeber’s recent *Utopia of Rules*.

50. Davies, 3.

51. *Ibid.*, 4-5.

52. *Ibid.*, 4-5.

53. *Ibid.*, 140ff.

54. *Ibid.*, 263-264.

55. *Ibid.*, 264.

56. *Ibid.*, 249.

57. *Ibid.*, 250.



is desired. He writes,

It is only in a society that makes generalised, personalised growth the ultimate virtue that a disorder of generalised, personalised collapse will become inevitable. And so a culture which values only optimism will produce pathologies of pessimism; an economy built around competitiveness will turn defeatism into a disease.<sup>58</sup>

I regard this analysis as an important fleshing out of the lines of Anne Boyer quoted in the introduction, that we “grow sick and depressed and motionless under all the merciless and circulatory conditions of all the capitalist yes...” As such, it relates to my main theme of generative refusal: Davies identifies a contemporary political phenomenon that invites creative interruption. Moreover, he recognises that any solution must be political in the fullest sense, by which he means based on “whole new models of organisation, and not simply new techniques of management.”<sup>59</sup>

### III. “Two times two is four is...the beginning of death”

I mentioned that utopian attempts to measure and maximise happiness had a history. So does the critique and refusal of that endeavour. For a prescient example of the latter, we can turn first to Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, a text that offers its own idiosyncratic critique of utopian formulas.<sup>60</sup> It can be read partly as a response to the ideas of Nikolai Chernyshevsky, who saw a utopian future for humanity in the political enactment of the principles of ‘rational egoism’, an adaptation of the

enlightened self-interest of the English utilitarians.<sup>61</sup> Chernyshevsky held, among other things, that universal happiness could be attained through a fully rationalised and scientifically administered social order. In 1863, he published a novel, *What is to be done?*, which was a vehicle for some of these utopian ideas (Lenin was an avid devotee of the book, and Joseph Frank once wrote that it, far more than Marx’s *Capital*, “supplied the emotional dynamic that eventually went to make the Russian Revolution.”)<sup>62</sup> A year later, Dostoevsky published *Notes from Underground*, with Chernyshevsky’s novel squarely in his sights.

The *Notes* is an idiosyncratic memoir of an unnamed, unreliable narrator, divided into two parts, which are in reverse order chronologically. The second part relays certain events from the narrator’s earlier life, which have various effects on him. This can be read as parodying the style and plot of *What is to be done?* The first part is a rambling diatribe against certain social and philosophical ideas given by the narrator who, in the interim between these parts, has become so disillusioned with the world that he has gone to live underground. This section incorporates a satirically exaggerated but nevertheless substantive critique of the utilitarian and utopian vision of Chernyshevsky and others like him, such as Charles Fourier.<sup>63</sup>

It is relevant to mention that London’s Crystal Palace, which had been built a decade or so earlier to house the Great Exhibition, was an important symbol of utopianism in Chernyshevsky’s *What is to be done?* Marshall Berman has explained that, for Chernyshevsky, the Palace represented:

a highly developed, super-technological, self-contained exurban world, comprehensively planned and organised...more thoroughly controlled and administered and hence ‘more pleasant and advantageous than any modern metropolis could ever be.’<sup>64</sup>

Berman notes that this reflected Russian fantasies of Western modernisation much more than it did the reality of the Crystal Palace. But with Chernyshevsky’s fantasies in mind, in the *Notes*, Dostoevsky has his bad-tempered narrator refer to the Crystal Palace as a “chicken coop.”<sup>65</sup> He refers to it as such because of the reduced, deterministic image of humanity that underlies those fantasies. He describes the envisioned utopian future as follows:

...all human actions will... be calculated according to...laws, mathematically, like a table of logarithms, up to 108,000, and entered into a calendar...it is then that new economic relations will come, quite ready-made, and calculated with mathematical precision, so that all possible questions will vanish in an instant, essentially because they will have been given all possible answers. Then the crystal palace will get built.<sup>66</sup>

Dostoevsky’s narrator is indignant at the prospect of such a future. He is indignant because this wish to make over society for the sake of an objective, rationally secured happiness, presupposes a dead and inert conception of what humans are. As Richard Pevear has put it, at issue here is “the question of the very nature of the human being who was to be so forcibly made happy.”<sup>67</sup> “Who wants

58. Ibid., 177.

59. Ibid., 251.

60. As the quotation suggests, Dostoevsky associate utopianism with deathliness. See also his *Dream of a Ridiculous Man*.

61. Frank, Dostoevsky, xvi, 414ff.

62. Frank, “Chernyshevsky,” 68. This line now appears on numerous editions of the book.

63. Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 423. As Frank explains, it is not that the *Underground Man* should be read as a simple hero, and certainly not as a mere mouthpiece for Dostoevsky. Rather, he represents the tortured end point of someone who has tried to accept Chernyshevsky’s materialist determinism intellectually, while simultaneously rejecting it on the emotional-intuitive level of moral conscience (414-416, 421).

64. Berman, 244.

65. Dostoevsky, 35-36.

66. Ibid., 24-25.

67. Pevear, xiv.

to want according to a little table?" the narrator protests; "Isn't there something that not only has not been but even cannot be fitted into any classification?" If human life is reducible to these formulas, to "two times two is four," he avers, then there is "nothing left – not only to do, but even to learn. [...] Two times two is four is no longer life, gentleman, but the beginning of death."<sup>68</sup>

In a fit of economic wordplay, he suggests that there exists a "profit" which escapes these calculations; a profit, indeed, "remarkable because it destroys all our classifications and constantly shatters all the systems elaborated by the lovers of mankind for the happiness of mankind." This "most profitable profit" is precisely the freedom to refuse to do what one is told is rational and in one's best interests by those who claim the authority to do so, and it is part and parcel of what it means to be human to make such refusals. To see this inclination as an irrational anomaly, a departure from the truly (scientifically, measurably) human, as something to be corrected or eradicated, is—as he puts it—to reduce humankind to the status of a "sprig in an organ barrel," a cog in a machine, or to make this more crudely contemporary, a data point in an algorithmic system of happiness maximisation.<sup>69</sup> Returning to Arendt, we might say that it is to edit out plurality and natality from human affairs by turning the human person into a predictable creature. The larger point, learned not only from Arendt but the example of history, is that human affairs cannot be made to fit these kinds of formulas without violence. Commenting on Dostoevsky's *Notes*, Rowan Williams has for this reason described the attempt to amputate or delete "unmanageable

desires" for the sake of an abstract peace or happiness as the "quintessential form of 'modern' violence."<sup>70</sup>

Davies' book *The Happiness Industry* explains why it may be necessary today to resist attempts to 'maximise' our well-being.<sup>71</sup> In the *Notes*, there is a comically overblown passage describing this kind of impulse in a person:

Shower him with all earthly blessings, drown him in happiness completely, over his head, so that only bubbles pop up on the surface of happiness, as on water; give him such economic satisfaction that he no longer has anything left to do at all except sleep, eat gingerbread, and worry about the noncessation of world history – and it is here, just here, that he, this man, out of sheer ingratitude, out of sheer lampoonery, will do something nasty. He will even risk his gingerbread, and wish on purpose for the most pernicious nonsense, the most non-economical meaninglessness, solely in order to mix into all this positive good sense his own pernicious, fantastical element.<sup>72</sup>

A person will do this, the narrator contends, in order to "confirm to himself" that "human beings are still human beings and not piano keys."<sup>73</sup> Somewhat mischievously, I wish to interpret this passage, with all its ridiculous bloody-mindedness and hopeless recalcitrance, as describing at least in some respects that moment of rupture - of interruption and disruption - that is inherent in Arendt's notion of action, as described in the first section above. The will to refuse ready-made blueprints for human happiness is

one way in which plurality and natality burst into the open in human affairs.

#### IV. Ludic interruption, lived and written

This thought brings me, finally, to Daniil Kharms, a Russian writer of the early twentieth century, whose life for my purposes embodies Arendtian action in just this sense: action in a playfully interruptive and ridiculous but ultimately serious mode.<sup>74</sup> Arendt held that narrative has a "redemptive power."<sup>75</sup> This is because, as Maša Mrovlje has neatly remarked, "by endowing with significance particular, single events and gestures, stories are able to affirm human freedom as a source of worldly events."<sup>76</sup> As such, I have given the following paragraphs a loosely narrative form.

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Daniil Kharms was born Daniil Yuvachev in St Petersburg in 1905. In 1924, the same year Petrograd—as St Petersburg had come to be known in the meantime—was renamed again, as Leningrad, Yuvachev decided to rename himself, Daniil Kharms, a moniker which he seems to have derived from the English word 'charm'.<sup>77</sup> He became involved in avant-garde Leningrad literary circles, and in 1928 founded an art collective called the OBERIU (a nonsense word).<sup>78</sup> This did not, however, prove a good career move. The 1920s and 30s were a period of intense centralisation of Soviet culture, one in which the official aesthetic ideology of Socialist Realism was enforced with increasing dogmatism. Kharms' artistic outlook was, moreover, at loggerheads with the new Soviet reality, which sought the enactment of a thoroughly materi-

68. Dostoevsky, 34.

69. *Ibid.*, 34-35.

70. Williams, 19.

71. E.g. Davies, 270-276.

72. Dostoevsky, 30. Jean Baudrillard famously used the first part of this passage as an epigraph in his book *The Consumer Society*.

73. Dostoevsky, 30.

74. The account of Kharms' life given below relies heavily on Matvei Yankelevich's excellent introductory essay to *Today I Wrote Nothing*. See also, Roberts, 33-44.

75. Benhabib, "Redemptive Power."

76. Mrovlje, 74.

77. Yankelevich, 19.

78. Cf. Roberts.

alist, mechanistic, scientific-utilitarian vision for society, not too distant from that which Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* lampoons in the *Notes*. In contrast to this, Yankelevich has described the guiding principles of Kharms' literary work as follows:

Logical connections are thrown out, chance seeks revenge on received order, violence begets violence with neither motive nor authorial reprimand, and magic and nonsense prevail over reason. Kharms uses the language of sequence and logic only to undermine it.<sup>79</sup>

For example, the following passage from a story called *Sinfonia #2* is instructive:

*The incident was really quite typical, but still curious, for thanks to me Marina Petrovna went completely bald, like the palm of your hand. It happened like this: One day I came over to see Marina Petrovna and, bang!, she went bald. And that's all.*<sup>80</sup>

Kharms was disciplined by the Soviet authorities. The members of his group were referred to as "reactionary jugglers" and "literary hooligans," and their poetry was labeled "counter-revolutionary."<sup>81</sup> He made ends meet by publishing work written for children. In 1931, however, he and several of his friends, were arrested and charged with conducting "anti-Soviet activities in the field of children's literature." Kharms' writing for children was deemed anti-Soviet, "because of its absurd logic and its refusal to preach materialist Soviet values." During interrogation, Kharms essentially admitted that his work had the aim of "distancing his readers" from the present reality; he confessed that he "consciously renounced contemporary

reality," admitting that his philosophy was "deeply hostile to the present." Yankelevich explains that, "The utilitarian ideology of Soviet Russia, and, arguably, the technologically oriented thrust of modernity were anathema to Kharms' worldview."<sup>82</sup>

It was not just through his work that Kharms' provoked suspicion, but also through his unpredictable and bizarre behaviour. The following passage of biography is instructive:

Public displays of decadent and purposefully allogical behaviour earned Kharms a reputation in Leningrad cultural circles. It was hard not to notice this tall and striking man parading down the main boulevards, dressed as a tweedy English dandy complete with hunting cap and calabash pipe... Rumours, some of which were later elevated to the status of legend, circulated about his unusual behaviour. He brought his own silverware, stamped with noble insignias, to proletarian pubs. He was prone to interrupt the flow of foot traffic on Nevsky Prospect by suddenly taking a prostrate position on the pavement, then, after a crowd had gathered around to see what was the matter, getting up and walking away as though nothing had happened. He kept a large machine at home, which he made of found scrap. When asked what it did, Kharms would retort, 'Nothing. It's just a machine.'<sup>83</sup>

Kharms had a strong nose for the ridiculous, in life and in writing. Roberts notes that some of his contemporaries saw him as continuing in the long Russian tradition of the holy fool, whose

self-mockery "could reveal the stupidity of the world."<sup>84</sup> And indeed, Kharms is also described as having had "a religious sense of responsibility for words... he seemed convinced that he would answer for them before a higher authority than Soviet censorship or the political police."<sup>85</sup> This is to say that his was undoubtedly a very serious form of play. The major tools of his prose works are digression and interruption, that is, an abrupt and unexpected change of course or cessation of travel, which disrupts the predictable, linear flow of time and the link between cause and effect, elevating the moment of surprise. With such tools, Yankelevich writes, "[Kharms] attempts to save literature from its enslavement to progress," and also make us aware of our own "mechanization [...] our weakness for unthinkingly following predetermined patterns of action and perception that limit our confrontation with the world, blinding us to differences."<sup>86</sup>

Much of Kharms' work would now be called micro-fiction. The best way of describing his little stories is to say that they trip you up.<sup>87</sup> In some of them nothing of note happens, and it is their banality or the abruptness of their conclusion that befuddles. For example, a story called *The Meeting*:

*Now, one day, a man went to work, and on the way he met another man, who, having bought a loaf of Polish bread, was heading back home where he came from.*

*And that's it, more or less.*<sup>88</sup>

In others, the story doesn't get going at all, because the author cannot recall the name of the animal he wants to tell you about, or stops early because he has lost his inkwell, or falls off his chair. In *An*

79. Yankelevich, 16.

80. Kharms, 270.

81. Yankelevich, 24-25.

82. *Ibid.*

83. *Ibid.*

84. Roberts, 37.

85. Yankelevich, 15.

86. *Ibid.*, 15; 30.

87. Yankelevich, 27.

88. Kharms, 69.

*Unsuccessful Play*, five characters come out on stage one after the other, but each are unable to get through more than a few words before vomiting and running off, at which point the audience is informed that the theatre will be closing early due to illness.<sup>89</sup> Yet in others, a frantic series of apparently unrelated events are listed in staccato fashion—such as in the story, *Events*—or the author describes strange happenings that mingle the banal with the dreamlike, frightening, and miraculous.<sup>90</sup> For example, a story called *How One Man Fell to Pieces*:

*"They say all the good babes are wide-bottomed. Oh, I just love big-bosomed babes. I like the way they smell." Saying this he began to grow taller and, reaching the ceiling, he fell apart into a thousand little spheres.*

*Panteley the janitor came by and swept up all these spheres into a dustpan, which he usually used to gather horse manure, and took the spheres away to some distant part of the yard.*

*All the while the sun continued to shine as before, and puffy ladies continued, as before, to smell enchantingly.*<sup>91</sup>

As the 1930s progressed and the political atmosphere in Russia darkened, Kharms found it ever harder to publish his work, and became gradually more destitute.<sup>92</sup> He wrote, like many of his contemporaries, 'for the desk drawer', his audience limited to his wife and a small group of friends. Yet he is said to have met often "with artists and fellow writers, and also enjoyed the company of 'natural

thinkers', men living on the margins or even on the streets, whose unusual ideas and manner of behaviour Kharms found exciting precisely because they were out of sync with the norm."<sup>93</sup> In 1939, in a diary entry that brings to mind a similar emphasis in Arendt, he wrote that, "Only miracle interests me."<sup>94</sup> Yankelevich writes that, for Kharms, "chance itself is a transcendent category; error and accident, the very glue of the universe, constitute manifestations in this world of the miraculous."<sup>95</sup>

Kharms continued to embrace idiosyncratic behaviour, developing—apparently on purpose—a tic; a gesture that acquaintances likened to a snort or a hiccup. Yankelevich again:

Like the interruptions in his stories, Kharms self-inflicted tic brought the independent moment into the foreground and broke up the regular flow of time. It seems that this was just one more way that Kharms sought to avoid a 'mechanised' life: Surprise and unpredictability created, in the otherwise dull continuum, a 'slight error' – something critically important to Kharms's aesthetic theory, and which, by extension, he applied to the real world.<sup>96</sup>

The outbreak of the Second World War meant that anyone with a police record was picked up by the secret service. Under analysis, Kharms was deemed too psychiatrically unfit to be useful, and was eventually sent to a prison hospital. There he died of starvation on 2 February 1942, during the blockade of Leningrad.

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Kharms is not of course a 'great' historical figure. Of his work for adults, only two early poems were published during his lifetime, and even today he is far from well-known. I have nevertheless chosen this 'reactionary juggler' as my exemplar of Arendtian action because of his marginality, rather than in spite of it, as this poses a particular challenge in relation to Arendt's framework.

Among various criticisms made of the latter, two stand out here. The first is that in setting up her hierarchy of action, work, and labour, Arendt denigrates labour and work, presenting labour as sub-human and work as irredeemably violent, relegating both to a private, sub-political sphere.<sup>97</sup> One can manoeuvre Arendt at least some way out of this problem. She writes, and this is sometimes overlooked, that although labour, work, and action are conceptually distinct, they are nevertheless in practice more or less interwoven. She states, for example, that, "An element of labouring is present in all human activities, even the highest, insofar as they are undertaken as 'routine' jobs by which we make our living and keep ourselves alive."<sup>98</sup> She also says it will be impossible to be engaged in action all the time, so a good human life could never be composed purely of that.<sup>99</sup> In other words, the force of this charge rests on the extent to which one interprets it as a rigid edifice, as opposed to something more fluid or porous.

A second but related criticism is that Arendt's elevation of action encourages an 'elitist' view of history, attached to an antique notion of glory, with a narrative "populated by the deeds of great men",

89. *Ibid.*, 70.

90. *Ibid.*, 46.

91. *Ibid.*, 231.

92. Yankelevich, 25. His commitment to his artistic cause never waned, however; in a diary entry in Autumn 1937, at the height of Stalin's purges, he wrote, "I am interested only in nonsense; only in that which has no practical meaning. Life interests me only in its most absurd manifestations" (11).

93. *Ibid.*, 25.

94. *Ibid.*, 25-26.

95. *Ibid.*, 29.

96. *Ibid.*, 26.

97. See e.g. Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, 123-124, 125-126, 157 – on Arendt's "phenomenological essentialism"; Hughes, 226-227; Sayers, 117-118; discussions throughout Honig; for a good reflection on how some of these questions relate to Arendt's attitude to nature, see Bowring.

98. Arendt, "Labor, Work, Action," 173.

99. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 198-199.

and the stories of the politically and socially marginalized rendered somewhat irrelevant.<sup>100</sup> This is linked to the first criticism, since it has to do with how porous her categories of activity and the spheres to which they relate can be said to be, and specifically here of whether her public sphere is too strictly bounded. Voice has clearly summarised the issue:

Arendt's public sphere is, in principle, open to all citizens equally but the facts overwhelmingly demonstrate that the poor and the marginalized are denied access to the public sphere and so cannot speak as equals with their fellow citizens. If politics cannot be concerned with social issues and thus with matters of access to the public sphere, then Arendt's idea of unconstrained deliberation between equal citizens is seriously jeopardized. On the other hand, if politics does allow in social concerns, then Arendt's quarantine of the political and the social is breached.<sup>101</sup>

I have suggested Kharms as an unorthodox representative of action as one way of responding to this difficulty. He is someone who, as regards the course of Soviet history at least, had an unquestionably insignificant role, and whose freedom to speak and act publicly was gradually diminished, until it was snuffed out completely. One commentator has remarked that, "Kharms and Vvedensky," (Aleksandr, another member of OBERIU), "were stripped of their voices, becoming 'marginal figures'...isolated from their own culture and their own epoch; therefore they continue to hold an unstable position, are continuously on the edge."<sup>102</sup> This makes Kharms a challenging exemplar of action. He lived under a regime that sought, in increasingly totalitarian fashion, to fabricate a utopian society grounded in 'scientific', utilitarian

ideals. That regime gradually took away his voice and ultimately his life. Yet his refusal to conform to that vision and those ideals, in both his life and his work, are, I would argue, a striking embodiment of the interruptive character of action in Arendt's sense. Refusing a political order that in its violent pursuit of utopian goals treated people as grist for the mill of history, and sought explicitly to fabricate a New (predictable) Soviet Man and to remove those citizens who would not be so engineered, Kharms made himself into a living interruption, and his strangely comic literary work is guided by the same interruptive logic. This had a profoundly serious purpose, which must be called political: publicly, for as long as possible, to resist assimilation to an order of the world that would, in the end, do away with human difference and creativity. In often playful and humorous ways, his actions and writings illuminate the relationship of plurality and natality with rupture that Arendt explores, within his own limited context and to his own cost.

I would hold that using Kharms in this way is broadly consistent with many aspects of Arendt's description of action. I am less interested, though, in remaining strictly faithful to her concept, than I am with extending her best insights in a way that clarifies the political significance of marginalised figures such as Kharms. To the extent that Kharms can be taken to embody action in her sense, so might many others historically and today who may not be great historical actors, and whose access to the public sphere may be precarious or threatened, but whose small acts of creative and generative resistance and refusal nonetheless have real political and ethical weight. This seems a worthwhile modification.

That Kharms life and work might now be understood in this manner was far from inevitable, however. His notebooks would

have been lost during the Second World War were it not for the efforts of some loyal friends, who saved and kept them hidden until the 1960s, when they were smuggled out to the West. His marginality reveals in an extreme way, therefore, the contingencies that Arendt acknowledges are inherent in all human action: that we cannot know in advance or control the final meaning of what we do, because that will depend on others.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, we can only consider Kharms' story in the way we have because it is long over. None of the meaning that we might now find in his life would have been transparent to him, and to him none of it would have seemed destined. Far from it. He often struggled to write. One of his more melancholy notes from January 1937 reads, "Today I wrote nothing. Doesn't matter"—and if it might be tempting to read that flippantly it appears alongside prayers for divine inspiration that are far from flippant.<sup>104</sup> Arendt grasps the ambiguities here when she writes, "Although everybody starts his own story, at least his own life-story, nobody is the author or producer of it. And yet, it is precisely in these stories that the actual meaning of human life finally reveals itself."<sup>105</sup> If action in the sense that we have been discussing it is unlike other more reliable modes of human activity, such as fit under Arendt's categories of labour and work, it is for the simple reason that, since we live in a world with others, with conflicting wills and intentions, our actions may become more or less than we intend them to be. It is a continual temptation, individually and collectively, to devise schemes to minimise this unpredictability, to increase our level of control. Yet for our shared life to flourish we must resist this impulse, being vigilant to allow room for what cannot be assimilated or anticipated.

**Conclusion: Roominess**

100. Passerin d'Entreves, 96-97; cf. Voice, 50; Canovan, "Contradictions," 5ff; Arendt, *Human Condition*, 179-180, 198-199.

101. Voice, 51. In restricting her public sphere Arendt is arguably too heavily indebted to antique notions of the *polis* as a public space of deliberation, not of production or consumption. Cf. Passerin d'Entreves, 84-85, 95-97.

102. Rosanna Giaquinta, quoted in Yankelevich, 40 n41.

103. As Arendt puts it, the disclosure that accompanies action can "almost never be achieved as a wilful purpose" (*Human Condition*, 178).

104. Kharms, 120.

105. Arendt, "Labor, Work, Action," 180.

I began this essay by quoting Anne Boyer, that “there is a lot of room for a meaning inside a ‘no’ spoken in the tremendous logic of a refused order of the world.” We have returned to this theme of ‘roominess’, in a different sense, above at its end. A benefit of examining Arendt’s theory of action through the lens of unpredictability and rupture is that it foregrounds the limits of human political power in a shared world of plurality and natality. It also foregrounds the political temptation, strongly felt throughout the modern age, to try to break beyond those limits, sometimes with good intentions, such as for the sake of stability or general happiness. Arendt’s warning is that this risks an ethically and politically inhuman outcome, because of what it must suppress through violence of one kind or another. To allow room becomes, against this background, a distinct political task. In this, Arendt’s account of action contains within it a paradoxical moment of restraint or renunciation—a moment of active passivity or passive activity—since to allow room means to relinquish control, or a claim to control, over some space into which others may then speak and act. What happens when this kind of space is threatened by schemes that would, giving in to the aforementioned temptation, make claim to a more totalising mastery over human affairs? Through a variety of sources we have explored how refusing to be conformed to such schemes, finding ways to interrupt them, can also be actions in Arendt’s sense, allowing for a roominess of another kind. This is the mode of generative refusal Boyer describes, which in negating one order of the world simultaneously affirms other, more capacious meanings of being human—a ‘no’ that has room within it for a different and broader ‘yes’. This is how I interpret the ludic interruptions and refusals made by Kharms and embodied, to a lesser extent, by passages in Dostoevsky’s *Notes*. Kharms’ small deeds of interruption and the interruptive strangeness of his enigmatic stories were ways of resisting the formulaic reduction of human affairs, and of allowing room for all within it that was unpredictable and could not be so reduced. His was a serious, luminous kind of play in a darkening

time. Insofar as the present continues to be afflicted by programmes that seek to reduce the human to a predictable thing, such as the austere tech-led utopianism of Davies’ ‘happiness industry’, one political task will be to find creative ways to refuse and interrupt those programmes in order similarly to allow room.

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