

The Shanker Chronicles – Season 1, Episode 2 – Freedom & Constraint

Show Notes and Key Points from Dr. Shanker:

- Everywhere we look we are seeing explosions of anger: in some cases, very disturbing ones
- e.g., doctors receiving death threats because they counselled vaccination
- A man assaulting a nurse for giving his wife the COVID vaccine
- People working in the service industry, or flight attendants being assaulted when they ask someone to wear a mask.
- In Self-Reg we are forever asking ‘Why?’, and here too we need to ask, ‘Why are we seeing an epidemic of anger?’.
- Complex question, with multiple factors. This episode focused on one, which we keep hearing about: the assault on personal freedom
- Chapter 9 of Reframed is all about the psychological dimension of freedom:
 - How freedom rests on the ability to choose
 - And this is precisely the capacity that we lose when we are in Red Brain
- On a straightforward reading, it’s clear why being in Red Brain makes us vulnerable to a surge of epinephrine, which fuels anger
- But we are seeing this epidemic in children and teens as well as adults. We are seeing an epidemic of kindled amygdalae
- What happens when we feel our Freedom is threatened?
 - The answer is Anger.

Dr. Shanker’s story of his dad:

- An angry man
- Forever railing about freedom
- In particular, the tyranny of social convention
- White socks were his form of resistance to social norms

- Political Philosophy: “Discuss the opening line of Rousseau’s Social Contract”
 - “Man is born free but everywhere is in chains” (1762)
 - If any single sentence could be seen as the foundation of the Enlightenment, this was it
 - Basic argument: freedom is a human birthright - We only enter civil society to protect our freedom. This basic right has been subverted in the modern state.
 - I found this line stirring but the argument deeply troubling
 - Why was Rousseau conflating liberty and freedom?
 - The former refers to our freedom to act as we choose provided it hurts no one else
 - The latter refers simply to our **ability to choose**
 - The only legitimate political authority is the authority consented to by all the people, who have agreed to such government by entering into a social contract for the sake of their mutual preservation
 - It struck me that what Rousseau was saying was that the choice being made is simply to live in society
 - By making this choice we agree to suppress our personal desires to the General Will
 - If the General Will is to achieve herd immunity, then much as I may be opposed to the idea of vaccination, I agree to get vaccinated if I wish to continue to enjoy all the other benefits of living in my society (such as access to hospital care if I get COVID)
 - So, Rousseau is drawing a fundamental distinction between being constrained by the government and being self-constrained
 - The latter, insofar as it’s an act of choice, is an expression of freedom
- Tyranny of the majority - “My father would have absolutely hated this book”
- The question that puzzled me the most: But what exactly does it mean to say that ‘freedom is our birthright?’
- Children are certainly not born free

- Last 30 years: freedom is an illusion
- Free will – Gazzaniga (Who’s in Charge: Free will and the science of the brain)
- Freedom is a rationalist illusion

- Psychology reasoning: we only think we are choosing freely
- But maybe Rousseau had divined a deeper truth
 - The key lies in the last word of the sentence: that we are “everywhere in chains”
 - We are born with a natural aversion to restraint
 - Try saying “No” to a toddler
 - We see it in the baby (try putting a child in a car seat)
 - Try saying No to a teenager. Any teenager

- Children are being conditioned to accept constraint from an early age without getting angry
- Even the desks we have them sit at are constraining, or we constrain them with our voice, standing over them, all the rules are constraints
- But we are trying to teach them self-constraint: the rewards that they’ll receive as a dutiful member of society
 - i.e., trying to create the desire to conform, to accept constraint without anger
- All the anger we’re seeing today: lack of self-constraint
- On a Self-control paradigm, the anger looks like a shocking decline in inhibition
- **On a Self-Regulation paradigm, it looks like a shocking increase in stress**

- This episode: looking at the stress created by constraint
 - That’s the big problem for some when it comes to wearing a mask
 - The mask feels claustrophobic
 - This feeling triggers sympathetic arousal
 - Breathing fresh air triggers serotonin
 - Oxygen to the brain makes us feel energized
 - Releases toxins from the lungs

- We can go a step deeper: maybe the chains that Rousseau was talking about are neurochemical
 - In particular, the dopamine chain
- Panksepp: “When SEEKING is thwarted, RAGE is aroused. Anger is provoked by curtailing animals' freedom of action”.
 - On Panksepp’s reading, the obstruction triggers a deep sub-cortical network that infuses us with the “psychic energy” needed to overcome the obstruction
- So where does the problem lie?
 - When SEEKING is thwarted, RAGE is aroused
 - If dopamine is triggered, and we are blocked from the goal that’s triggered the dopamine, the RAGE circuit is aroused
 - And vaccine passports are blocking all sorts of things
 - The very thought of taking off the mask triggers a surge of dopamine
 - The very act of shouting at a health worker triggers dopamine
 - We can create our own dopamine by getting angry
- Anger triggers dopamine, which in turn triggers behaviours that can come into conflict with the General Will
- My father spent the last thirty years of his life traveling to exotic places around the world
 - I believe he was driven by dopamine urge
 - More fundamentally, he was living out Rousseau’s choice: trying to find a society where he was not constrained by social convention
 - Towards the end of his life he turned to me and said in a very sad and tired voice: “All societies are the same”
 - I think he too had come to feel that freedom is an illusion
 - And I rejected this. I reject this.
- Freedom isn’t so much our birthright as our most profound desire and aspiration
 - Neurobiological as well as psychological
- But freedom can only exist if we are in Blue Brain
 - And freedom can only exist if everyone has the same right
 - Otherwise, we become polarized

- That, I think, was what Rousseau was after
 - And that is fundamentally what Self-Reg is after
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- **The only difference is, Self-Reg provides us with the tools to achieve this, and not just stirring messages**
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- An Over-worked SEEKing system
 - Kindled alarm: exhausting, making us that much more vulnerable to RAGE

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