

Habit, Practice, Repetition and The Gentle Path to Weight Gain

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In this morning's talk I quoted from a fictitious dialogue written by Roger Scruton in which he explores the motivation behind disenchantment's charm:

Knowing that we cannot stand against the force of science, we decide instead to join it. We pull down our dear illusions, hurry impatiently onwards, to the point where nature will be stripped of her moral clothing, and stand before us as she really is – not a she but an it. *In this way we take revenge on the hopes which disappointed us.*

It is this final sentence I would like to consider. Simon Critchley writes that philosophy 'begins in disappointment', specifically the disappointment that emerges from having to accept our limitedness and our finiteness. Following Kant, Critchley writes, the 'great metaphysical dream of the soul moving frictionless towards knowledge of itself, things in themselves and God is just that, a dream'. Kant gave us a 'lesson in limitation', and one that we continue to struggle to come to terms with. Nietzsche's proclaimed Death of God was seen by many as a revolutionary call to embrace the possibilities that post-religious thinking presents, and yet, as Mark Wrathall has suggested, 'it is a terrible misreading of Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God to take it as a bald atheism, an undisguised declaration of the end of everything that is divine... [T]hose who think that the proclamation could mean *this* must themselves be starting with an inadequate conception of God'. We can see how 20th century movements like postmodernism threw out God, religion, metaphysics, even belief itself, and left nothing in its place, for there was no recognition that anything needed to be provided.

As touched on this morning, Nietzsche sounded a warning when he connected the Death of God with the emptiness of a life in which 'it will appear for a long time as if all weightiness were gone from things'. Wrathall understands Nietzsche's comment on weightiness to refer to 'mattering' or 'importance', writing that following the Death of God, 'we lose a sense that *our* understanding of things – including having a shared vision of the good, or a notion of the correct way to live a life, or an idea of justness, and so on – is grounded in something more than just our willing it to be so'. Our post-religious thinking veers between an ironic distancing and a jaded pseudo-nihilism, such as the ultimate questions of life are dismissed or trivialised.

Consider the late novelist and essayist David Foster Wallace. In a review of Joseph Frank's biography of Dostoevsky, Wallace contrasts the 'degrees of passion, conviction, and engagement with deep moral issues' displayed by Dostoevsky with the novelists of our time who he describes as 'so thematically shallow and lightweight, so morally impoverished'. Wallace asks why 'we seem to require of our art an ironic distance from deep convictions or dangerous

questions, so that contemporary writers have to either make jokes of them or else try to work them in under cover of some formal trick'. Elsewhere he refers to the 'congenital scepticism' of our culture, noting that 'our intelligentsia distrust strong belief, open conviction. Material passion is one thing, but ideological passion disgusts us on some deep level'. Similarly Milan Kundera captures the paradoxical situation of being burdened by the weight of lightness:

Is heaviness truly deplorable and lightness splendid? The heaviest of burdens crushes us, we sink beneath it, it pins us to the ground. But the heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become. Conversely, the absolute absence of a burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into the heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant. What then shall we choose? Weight or lightness?

We can see in Iris Murdoch's work the fears that a commitment to weightiness in the moral life entail in our times:

Of course one is afraid that the attempt to be good may turn out to be meaningless, or at best something vague and not very important, or turn out as Nietzsche described it.

Elsewhere she critically engages with her defence of the idea of the 'Good' understood in a Platonic sense, and so in strong opposition to post-religious thinking:

At this point someone might say, all this is very well, the only difficulty is that none of it is true... To speak of Good in this portentous manner is simply to speak of the old concept of God in a thin disguise. But at least 'God' could play a real consoling and encouraging role... 'Good' even as a fiction is not likely to inspire, or even be comprehensible to, more than a small number of mystically minded people who, reluctant to surrender 'God', fake up 'Good' in his image, so as to preserve some kind of hope.

Let's briefly consider Sartre as someone who would have strongly opposed Murdoch on ideas of the 'Good', and about whom Murdoch herself wrote extensively. Sartre rebels against any *a priori* notions of morality or the Good. In *Being and Nothingness*, he writes that:

My freedom is the unique foundation of values and...*nothing*, absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that particular value... My freedom is anguished at being the foundation of values while itself

without foundation... It is anguish before values which is the recognition of the ideality of values.

The idea of creating our own values in a meaningless and absurd world is of course very appealing in some respects, especially for those who are keen to push the limits of the possible - political, moral, intellectual, erotic, and so on - beyond the previous boundaries imposed by the presence of supposedly objective values. And yet how does one create an ethics from an apparently fully subjective worldview? Consider Aldous Huxley's conclusion regarding the Marquis de Sade's philosophy:

De Sade's philosophy was the philosophy of meaninglessness carried to its logical conclusion. Life was without significance. Values were illusory and ideals merely the inventions of cunning priests and kings. Sensations and animal pleasures alone possessed reality and were alone worth living for. There was no reason why one should have the slightest consideration for anyone else. For those who found rape and murder amusing, rape and murder were fully legitimate activities.

It is certainly possible to envisage the world as meaningless and lacking in values, especially if you are sufficiently motivated to do so (perhaps in the knowledge that this would go a long way to undermining religious claims to moral authority). But it is worth considering how radical such a position is, for prior to the Death of God there was no need to impose values upon the world through an act of will; rather values were, to use a phrase that Sartre employs to mock such a position, 'sown on my path as thousands of little real demands'. Historically, freedom of the will was achieved through *submission of the will* to God; only recently has *imposition of the will* on a Godless universe been equated with freedom. Traditionally the alienated consciousness wills, while the unified consciousness responds or receives.

In her critique of existential moral philosophy, Murdoch suggests that 'our picture of ourselves has become too grand, we have isolated, and identified ourselves with, an unrealistic conception of will, we have lost the vision of a reality separate from ourselves'. Similarly Martin Heidegger considers Sartre's humanism to be a form of nihilism, the inevitable culmination of a mode of philosophical thinking that has increasingly subordinated all values to the human will, thus ignoring the meaningfulness inherent in the world around us. If thinking for Sartre is essentially a form of willing, for Heidegger it is a response. If Sartre understands consciousness as actively constituting and imposing values on the world, Heidegger reverses this formulation, arguing that 'thinking never creates the house of being'; rather 'Man is the shepherd of Being'. If Sartre holds the position that 'we are precisely in a situation where

there are only human beings’, Heidegger counters this with the assertion that ‘we are precisely in a situation where principally there is Being’.

While existentialism may seem to be opposed to much of the moral discourse emerging from science, especially in its emphasis on freedom over determinism, Murdoch sees both science and existentialism as guilty of dealing in too light and shallow a manner with moral questions, united as they are by a blanket denial of transcendence:

We need to be enabled to think in terms of degrees of freedom, and to picture, in a non-metaphysical, non-totalitarian, and non-religious sense, the transcendence of reality. A simpleminded faith in science, together with the assumption that we are all rational and totally free, engenders a dangerous lack of curiosity about the real world, a failure to appreciate the difficulty of knowing it... We are not isolated free choosers, but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy... What is required is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons.

We can see in this extract some core assumptions in Murdoch’s ontology of the human: that we are largely selfish and mechanical in our conduct, which is driven by the ‘fat relentless ego’ to distort reality such that the psyche’s ‘consciousness is not normally a transparent glass through which it views the world, but a cloud of more or less fantastic reverie designed to protect the psyche from pain’. The task of moral philosophy, far from coming up with ‘a relaxed picture of a mediocre achievement’ that is both ‘unambitious and optimistic’, should be to ask: ‘Are there any techniques for the purification and reorientation of an energy which is naturally selfish, in such a way that when moments of choice arrive we shall be sure of acting rightly?’ For Murdoch, the disciplining and transformation of the fat relentless ego emerges as the central task for moral philosophers to face. As Stephen Mulhall puts it, the transformation Murdoch proposes involves ‘attending to particulars’ and ‘genuinely attuning one’s consciousness to its objects’, so that ‘if one fails to achieve this, then those objects will rather be attuned to one’s consciousness, to its fantasies and distortions... In this sense, every subject has the object she deserves’. Similarly, Aldous Huxley writes that:

Knowledge is always a function of being. What we perceive and understand depends upon what we are; and what we are depends partly on circumstances, partly, and more profoundly, on the nature of the efforts we have made to realize our ideal and the nature of the ideal we have tried to realize.

That Murdoch's position has a distinctly religious feel to it is obvious. If the talk this morning explored the question of religious belief, this talk largely sets belief to one side and aims to explore the other side of the religious life – the habits, practices and repetitions that have sat alongside doctrinal content at the heart of all known religions and spiritual traditions throughout history. If people talk about the return of religion, they *may* be referring primarily to the return of a particular form of belief, as wittily captured by Peter Sloterdijk:

People keep believing everywhere else, but in our society we have glorified disillusionment. Indeed, why should Europeans be the only ones on a metaphysical diet when the rest of the world continues to dine unperturbed at the richly decked tables of illusion?

However what Sloterdijk argues is that *the practices are primary*, such that the 'false dichotomy of believers and unbelievers becomes obsolete and is replaced by the distinction between the practicing and the untrained'. Nietzsche suggests that the practice behaviour of humans is one of the 'broadest and longest facts that exist', while Sloterdijk characterises the ethical human being as *homo repetitivus*, the human in training. If the 19th century stood under the sign of production, and the 20th century under the sign of reflexivity, Sloterdijk argues that 'the future should present itself under the sign of the exercise'. For Sloterdijk, the enlightenment ideal of progress has made us lazy, content to drift along accepting the moderate incremental gains that progress offers as sufficient for one's moral, spiritual and existential wellbeing. The call to transcend oneself has moved from 'You Must Change Your Life!' to 'Let Us Change Your Life!' The kinds of radical spiritual exercises practiced by philosophers and thinkers since the dawn of human history now come to be looked upon as so much fanaticism. The vertical dimension is lost from human life, and all that remains is the horizontal dimension, the moderation of ethical standards and human aspirations. As Sloterdijk puts it:

The central moral-historical event of [the Modern Age] was not secularization, but rather the de-radicalization of the ethical dimension – or, if one prefers, the de-verticalization of existence. This is precisely what is meant by the once-great word 'progress'.

Sloterdijk offers a defence of philosophy as a fully-engaged, all-encompassing, noisy, emotional, dramatic, offensive, life-or-death kind of activity:

Philosophy remains a fruitless enterprise without the awakening of the whole individual to it.

Philosophy is the mode of thought shaped by the most radical form of prejudice: the passion of being-in-the-world. With the sole exception of

specialists in the field, virtually everyone senses that anything which offers less than this passion play remains philosophically trivial.

On the core goals of philosophy, Michael Foucault, who turned towards the question of practice and repetition in his late ethical writings asks:

But what then is philosophy – philosophical activity I mean – if it is not the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself? In what does it consist, if not in the endeavour to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known?

For Sloterdijk the practicing life, the life of training, is one that disables, via mental de-automatization and mental decontamination, certain kinds of thinking and liberates us from routines and inertias that deform us and mould us into ‘living caricatures of averageness...and incarnated platitudes’. In the end, Sloterdijk argues that we may as well accept the ‘behaviouristic insult’, specifically that ‘99.9% of our existence comprises repetitions, mostly of a strictly mechanical nature’, that what we think of as a self is little more than ‘a storm of repetition sequences beneath the roof of the skull’.

In light of Sloterdijk’s analysis, it is worth returning to Sartre. In his critique of Sartre’s account of freedom, Maurice Merleau-Ponty acknowledges the limitations that the body and the world place on our freedom. If Sartre endorsed the Kantian tradition’s defence of *a priori* freedom and rationality, Merleau-Ponty’s embodied account focuses on the centrality of habit in a way that challenges the traditional philosophical divisions of mind and body, nature and culture, freedom and determinism, and so on. Like Gilles Deleuze, who wrote that ‘there is no more striking answer to the problem of the self’ than that ‘we are habits, nothing but habits’, Merleau-Ponty grounds his critique of Sartre in a concrete practical account of freedom as lived in the world rather than as lived in the grand palaces of the philosophical imagination. Freedom is conditioned and thus limited by the situations in which we find ourselves. For Merleau-Ponty, Sartre’s resistance to a reductive causal determinism led him to posit an equally implausible account of freedom as akin to a Cartesian immaterial mind or a pure spirit. Somewhere in between these two accounts is the realistic freedom of a body engaged in a world that is always structured in meaningful ways due to our perception and action within it. For Merleau-Ponty (in contrast to Sartre) our freedom is structured *through* our habituations, our generalities, our probabilities, and not *in spite of them*. Contrary to Sartre’s ideal of absolute freedom created *ex nihilo*, Merleau-Ponty argues that ‘at the outset...I am situated in a social environment, and my freedom, although it may have the power to commit me elsewhere, has not the power to transform me instantly

into what I decide to be'. Elsewhere he again challenges Sartre by suggesting that:

The choice which we make of our life is always based on a certain givenness. My freedom can draw life away from its spontaneous course, but only by a series of unobtrusive deflections which necessitate first of all following its course – not by any absolute creation.

Merleau-Ponty argues that 'without the roots which it thrusts into the world, [freedom] would not be freedom at all'. It is notable that in his later work, increasingly inspired by Marxism, Sartre came to acknowledge and assimilate Merleau-Ponty's critique within its framework. There is something poignant about the most heroic and beautiful philosophical ideals existing only in the abstract world of thought, rather than the concrete world of action, but this was the price Sartre's philosophy paid for his later commitment to Marxism.

Determinism may feel like the future is already in place, leading to a kind of fatalism or resignation; the metaphor for the determinist world could be a set of train tracks drawing us inexorably along until the end of the line. However, it may be that determinism need not involve fatalism, but rather the acceptance that we cannot aspire to the kind of freedom that is sufficiently autonomous and self-governing to aim for the absolute ideal of negating the material world altogether. Change in a deterministic universe is possible, but requires hard work. As Arpaly puts it:

While it is normally easy to raise your arm by choice, it normally appears impossible to change a belief by similar choice... We can will mental *acts*, like deliberating and imagining, just as easily as we can will physical *acts*, such as raising an arm. But just as we cannot directly will our height or weight, we cannot will into existence, or out of existence, desires, or beliefs, or concerns, or values.

In fact, as she goes on to argue that 'to change anything of that sort [i.e. beliefs, desires, etc.] you will have to engage with the laws of nature just as carefully as an engineer'. Similarly Richard Holton writes that:

In a deterministic model it is still true that different changes require people to put in different amounts of effort, and, crucially, that the effort they put in makes a difference. If there hadn't been the effort, the outcome would have been different. So it is still true that in that sense people act: their efforts are not thwarted by forces that ensure an inevitable outcome.

The question of freedom becomes less about whether we *have* it, so much as how we can *acquire* it. As we have seen, philosophers from Kant to Sartre have posited freedom as the *ground* for morality, whereas religious traditions have tended to see liberation as the *goal* of sustained practice and devotion. As Clare Carlisle suggests, given these contrasting positions ‘it is no surprise that we find in our religious traditions a more serious and profound encounter with the difficulty of becoming different, and a more productive effort to teach and learn techniques of liberation’.

So the distinction between practicing and non-practicing beings is a false one – the true distinction is between those who engage in corrupt and harmful forms of training and those who do not. In this sense, as Sloterdijk points out, the move from one form to another form implies a conversion, implies the statement ‘I herewith leave the shared reality’ or ‘I wish to leave the continuum of the false and harmful’. In a manner that is reminiscent of Schopenhauer’s call for renunciation, Sloterdijk reminds us of how absurdly easy the attachment to the abhorrent can be, how immune we can become to the call to change our lives, even if this is in our own interests. We are reminded of the frog who is thrown into a pan of boiling water and jumps out immediately, but when placed in a pan of water that is heated very gradually loses the tension to spring when the moment to leap arrives.

Sloterdijk suggests that Schopenhauer’s doctrine of the resignation of the Will ‘reminds us that the unbounded hunger for life will not be able to solve the problems created by its free exercise by intensifying itself even more’. Nietzsche’s Dionysian dreams following the Death of God came far too late in humanity’s history. As Sloterdijk writes, ‘the only fact of universal ethical significance in the current world is the diffusely and ubiquitously growing realisation that things cannot continue in this way’. In contrast to what he terms the ‘paralyzing harmlessness of all current [ethical] discourses’, Sloterdijk argues that ‘ethics can only be based on the experience of the sublime’, that ‘only the sublime is capable of setting up the overtaxing that enables humans to head for the impossible’.

We can see many similarities between Murdoch and Sloterdijk in their accounts of the moral life. Both denounce the idea that humans are free in the sense that philosophers from Kant to Sartre described to ground their ethics; rather we are largely mechanical creatures of habit whose freedom *emerges* as the result of engaging in certain habits or practices rather than our habits or practices being grounded in freedom. Both see in religions important guides for how we are to become attuned to the world in such a way that will allow it to show up once again as possessing depth and weightiness; however, both focus primarily on religious practice over theory and doctrine. Both critique the ‘harmlessness’ and

mediocrity of current moral philosophy, and seek to counter the disappearance of depth in philosophy, which they both see as a consequence of damaging cultural trends following the Death of God. Ultimately, both seek to use philosophy to give weight back to a world that they perceive to have become unbearably light. Echoing them, Heidegger argues that the decisive question for our age is ‘whether we let every being weightlessly drive into nothingness or whether we want to give a weightiness to things again and especially to ourselves; whether we become masters over ourselves, in order to find ourselves in essence, or whether we lose ourselves in and with the existing nothingness’.