On the Art of Not Choosing

Anarchierkegaard

04/12/2024

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> "[The journalist] makes men doubly ridiculous. First by making them believe that it is necessary to have an opinion—and this is perhaps the most ridiculous aspect of the matter: one of those unhappy, inoffensive citizens who could have such an easy life, and then the journalist makes him believe that it is necessary to have an opinion. and then to rent them an opinion which despite its inconsistent quality is nevertheless put on and carried around as—an article of necessity."[1]

Learning to choose

I. Choosing not to choose is still a choice—one made in pursuit of authenticity.

For those of us who have danced under the light of existentialist thought in the past, the old Sartrean adage "if I do not choose, that is still a choice"[2] may have reared its ugly head. The notion that we, in some way, escape the moral responsibility of our actions in not choosing to do whatever particular action we choose not to do is a difficult one to really accept—those who stand by whilst evil is done are liable to be accused of allowing evil. This seems reasonable in many cases. The person who does not intervene when a woman is attacked by her would-be rapist will likely face a conflict against himself, understanding that there was an alternative possibility that he could have done more; of course, we are all human and prone to human cowardice—however, in the realm of ethics, hiding behind the terror of the evil to avoid one's responsibility to the other does not stop the act itself from being evil.

The person who does not intervene when a beggar is destitute in the streets will likely face a conflict against himself, understanding that there was an alternative possibility that he could have done more; of course, we are all human and prone to human selfishness—however, in the realm of ethics, hiding behind the fear of the drug-addicted or mentally ill to avoid one's responsibility to the other does not stop the act itself from being evil. The person who does not guide the other to prayer when in they are in a state of despair will likely face a conflict against himself, understanding that there was an alternative possibility that he could have done more; of course, we are all human and prone to embarrassment in the face of cosmological uncertainties—however, in the realm of theology, hiding the Lord from the other may be to invite judgement upon yourself. These are all abstract thoughts, aesthetic musings into the nothingness; however, they are also immediate situations that you and I, my reader, possibly know all too well.

Sartre's pithy quip is often used by those who would wield power over the indecisive and bumbling oaf that is prone to being forced into a decision by such power-wielding. Although the idea of *preference-shaping power*[3] might be more famously understood within, for example, the Marxist framework where the interests of the ruling classes shape and model those of the ruled,[4] the same relation appears in the life of the Marxist activist (itself an attempt to create an intra-class "caste"-relation) whereby the intellectuals hold influence and power over those swept up in their rhetoric. Much like the journalist—who is the category and prototype for all *preference-shaping power-wielders* within a Kierkegaardian framework, if such a thing can be said

[1] *JP* IV 3885

[2] *Existentialism is a Humanism*, p. 23, J. Sartre

[3] *Power: A Radical View*, p. 23, S. Lukes

[4] "Ruling Class and Ruling Ideas" from *The German Ideology*, p. 21–23, K. Marx and F. Engels

to exist—the activist takes up the role of setting the interests of the target into the "vortex"[5] of confusion that allows for manipulation.

Suppose the target is an "aesthete": in that case, this barrage will lead to a situation where it is made plainly apparent to the individual that "it is necessary to have an opinion"[6] on whatever particular issue is at hand. Subsequent particular issues are also afforded the same urgency for the ideality of democratic consent. When the individual, should they hope to remain an individual and not merely another number in the ranks of a parapolitical party or a number in the subscribers to a poorly-edited student newspaper, refuses to immediately fall in line, i.e., chooses not to make a choice, they are then harangued with the Sartrean invocation that draws all power into the activist before him. The idea of a radical choice is to force the individual to do what he might not do—it is to treat the individual as something other than a human being, as other than the neighbour.[7]

Here, there is a choice that precedes the choice the activist wishes for you to make, my reader: *either* you will make a genuine choice that is a reflection of your historical character and ideals, thereby participating in the construction of a self which attends to certain teleological ends due to a particular worldview—regardless of what these ends and this worldview are, i.e., the choice of "choosing oneself" in earnest commitment to a task, role, or relationship,[8] *or* you will be swept up in the "vortex" of "the one" who raises a baton to the confused and disorientated maw of "the Crowd" and turns them towards their particular interest.[9] In the gap between the ideality of the propositional sparring of the philosophical adversary and the reality of the existing individual, swept up in the flow of their actual, concrete lives, we find that the individual's existence *qua* existing individual is actually the thing which is at stake here.

To continue our idle thought experiment, whether this be some kind of *bourgeois* class oppression, the Marxist fable of "false consciousness", clerical imposition, or the force of "necessarily objective" reason that is *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* is irrelevant—the power-relation is established and the choice has been made *for them*. It runs roughshod over the existing individual, recognising such ideas as "authenticity" or "a self" as unnecessary nuisances. The mantra is exposed for what it is: *choosing not to choose is still a choice—and one which is treasonous against me*. For a variety of cultural, social, and otherwise interesting factors, the force of this subtly threatening stance is one which we can recognise as enforcing a certain "practical necessity" upon the individual. Of course, Christianity is the dialectical opposite of necessity *qua* freedom in the body of Christ.[10]

[5] "Armed Neutrality, or My Position as a Christian Author in Christendom" in *The Point of View*, p. 134, S. Kierkegaard

[6] *JP* IV 3885

[7] "Kierkegaard: Father of Existentialism or Critic of Existentialism?", p. 16, C. Stephen Evans

[8] "Frankfurt and Kierkegaard on BS, Wantonness, and Aestheticism: A Phenomenology of Inauthenticity", J. Davenport, from *Love, Reason, and Will: Kierkegaard After Frankfurt*, p. 95, ed. A. Rudd and J. Davenport

[9] "Language, Social Reality, and Resistance in the Age of Kierkegaard's Review of *Two Ages*", by R. L. Perkins, from *Kierkegaard Yearbook, 1999*, p. 164, edited by N. J. Cappelørn, H. Deuser, C. S. Evans, A. Hannay, and B. H. Kirmmse

[10] *Sickness Unto Death*, p. 37, [Anti-Climacus], ed. S. Kierkegaard

II. Choosing not to choose is still a choice—and one we take by the reigns.

For S. K., the notion of power is a funny thing. He compares the individual to a horse and trap, always in a dialectical conversation between the body that wants to run rampant and the mind that wants to pull back on the reigns:

> When a team of horses is to pull a heavy load ahead, what can the driver do for them? Indeed, he cannot pull it himself, and the second-rate driver can whip them—anyone can do that—but the competent driver, what can he do for them? He can help them get on the move pulling the wagon in a single instant with concentrated strength in a single pull. If, however, the driver creates confusion, if he handles the reins in such a way that the horses think that they should only get ready to pull on a given signal—but it was the coachman's idea that they should pull now; or if he pulls unevenly on the reins so that the one horse thinks that it is to pull and the other that the coachman is holding it back so that it can get ready-well, then the wagon does not move from the spot even if the horses have enough power.
>
> But just as we are distressed to see this sight, to see that there is power enough but that the person who is to be the master, the driver, is spoiling things, so also are we distressed to see the same thing happen to a human being. He does not lack power—a person never really does—but he mismanages himself. The person who is to be the master (it is, of course, he himself) ruins it; such a person works with perhaps scarcely a third of his power in the right place and with more than two-thirds of his power in the wrong place or against himself. Now he gives up working in order to begin to deliberate all over again, now he works instead of deliberating, now he pulls on the reins in the wrong way, now he wants to do both at the same time—and during all this he does not move from the spot. During all this, his life comes to a standstill, as it were; he cannot get the task firmly set, so that it stands firm, so that he is able to tear himself away from this work and have his strength available to carry out the task. The task does not become a burden, but he is swamped with the burdensome muddling with the task in order to get it, if possible, to stand firm. When that is so, he naturally never gets around to carrying the burden; after all, he cannot even get it to stand still; the moment he wants to tum his back, as it were, in order to pick up the burden, the burden seems to tumble down and he has to stack it up again. Ah, if one looks at people's lives, one often must say in sorrow: They do not themselves know what powers they have; they more or less keep themselves from finding that out, because they are using most of their powers to work against themselves.[11]

It should be clear that this illustration paints the *locus* of power in the life of the individual as the individual's will itself—thereby making the activist a threat to the individual's life, whether or not there is agreement here or not. Whether you choose to do one thing or not to do so, you are the one who holds the proverbial reigns over the potentially unbridled power of the self. While one is full of life and vitality, this will to self-control, or, as Johannes Climacus would dub a central

[11] "The Gospel of Sufferings: Christian Discourses", from *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, S. Kierkegaard, p. 295–296

concept in a Christian ethic, "the need to "hold oneself back" [*at holde igjen paa sig selv*]",[12] is always possible and always a challenge in the face of adversity, the temptation for over-reflection, and the reluctance to let the power rush forward in a passionate rush of blood. There is much to draw from this poetic musing, the ideal dream of the wandering soul who was unlucky enough to find himself dealing with an unruly and wilful team of powerful adversaries—yet, for S. K., this is not merely an illustration of a particular type of person, but the human condition outright.

Never in the thought experiment, of course, is it implied that the driver would ever be able to hand over control to a more adept horse-whisperer—indeed, the outside agent *qua* the whip is viewed with terrible suspicion as the tool by which any unethical fool, the feckless and pleading bumbler who insists his actions are not his own responsibility, gains the upper hand over the horsepower before him. In some respect, this illustration offers us two paths to understand: i) that the whip *qua* the use of violence undermines the strength of the driver and is a reaction against the natural desire to engage with reality, or ii) that the whip *qua* outside force undermines the self-control of the driver actually to handle the task in front of him. When the activist, or "the press" at large, turns their interest towards the individual and succeeds in whipping up an external cause to his action—thereby drawing him away from any and all particular ideals, at least in terms of priority—the individual loses himself and, by extending our little reflection, control of his horses, i.e., his passions. By inference, the task for the individual in becoming himself is to avoid this potentially catastrophic position.

As Dooley sharply draws us back to earth, the successfully brow-beaten individual begins the journey to becoming just another expression of the numerical[13] in "a collection of inauthentic individuals living amorally as a mass or crowd and expressing itself anonymously, abstractly, passionlessly, and irresponsibly."[14]

Despite a very robust suspicion of collective movements due to a fear of nihilistic directionlessness[15] and not completely comfortable with the notion of intersubjectivity due to a fear of nihilistic conformity,[16] S. K. was not opposed to us learning from one another—the outdated caricature of S. K. *qua* a radical idealist-Romantic should, at this point, be understood as a sign that the interlocutor is merely out of their depth. The danger of the activist, however, is that they have no intention to draw one out from aesthetic or ethical collapse into the "not-self", the transfigured realisation of the "born-again", but rather to construct the individual in their image; the attempt to steal the theological might from under the nose of the target is an attempt to steel the position of activist rebellion, a theology of the New Age.

To return to the Marxist example, the activist would impose the notion of a "false consciousness" onto the individual in order to identify that there is something *wrong* or *undesirable* about their perspective of the world around them—a clever play on the basic tendency that many people realise (or, possibly, *ought* to realise) they are not perfect and that they must venture onwards through time out into the world around them. By unsettling the individual in the "vortex", they

[12] *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments: A Mimic-Pathetic-Dialectic Composition — An Existential Contribution*, p. 165, [J. Climacus], tr. D. F. Swenson, ed. W. Lowrie

[13] "On My Work as an Author" in *The Point of View*, p. 20, S. Kierkegaard

[14] *Politics of Exodus: Søren Kierkegaard's Ethics of Responsibility*, p. 13, M. Dooley

[15] "Hubert Dreyfus: Seeking the Self in a Nihilistic Age", J. Westfall, from *Kierkegaard's Influence on Philosophy — Tome III: Anglophone Philosophy*, p. 60, ed. J. Stewart

[16] "Love and Continuity: The Significance of Intersubjectivity in the Second Part of *Either/Or*", by P. Søltoft (trans. by M. G. Piety), from *Kierkegaard Yearbook, 1997*, p. 224, edited by N. J. Cappelørn, H. Deuser, C. S. Evans, A. Hannay, and B. H. Kirmmse

become mouldable in the hands of the moulder of minds. In a grim imitation of the Lord, the activist attempts to reduce the individual to nothing to set upon the act of creating a transfigured automaton *ex nihilo*.

But how can one defend against this? Against the imagined "necessity" of the activist's cause, we find the genuine practical necessity— like the apocryphal tale of Martin Luther, who stood before the Council of Worms, the existing individual affirms "here I stand; I can do no other". Here, we find that an ardent faith and a commitment to something—because we are all committed to *something*, even those who are committed to non-commitment[17]—is the first defence against being ripped up from our roots whenever we encounter the "interesting."[18] To hold some personal conviction and direction in one's life allows for resistance against the activist; to hold oneself *als wäre nichts geschehen* [as though nothing had happened][19] in the face of a false collision that would merely wish to unsettle us; to hold a particular τέλος which provides direction and solace for the individual in the chaos of existence; to choose "simple dialogue"[20] over the bombastic propaganda which rips up foundations—this is the mark of one who can steer themselves through the wreckage and resist that force which seeks to level all human activity to unconscious reactions to an outside prodding. The activist searches for jellyfish[21] and is angered to break their finger on something concrete. In not choosing to do x simply because the activist attempts to whip up the "vortex" is to resist x on the grounds that it is enforced upon us; it is to apply the brakes [*bremser*] in a way that only a gadfly [*Bremse*] could.[22]

If we shall take up a cause—and all causes are open to the Christian inasmuch as they agree with the Christian grammar[23]—then we shall commit to it in its appropriation to our subjectivity and not simply allow that which is objective us to move us as if we lacked a backbone.

III. Choosing not to choose is still a choice—but always not choosing shows the unimportance of one's life.

Of course, this negative stance is not one which is particularly impressive in reality; leaning too far into this sceptical view of political action would lead one to some embarrassing conclusion such as the impervious idealist solipsism of the Stoics or the Hegelian—helpless against the forces of reality, we quickly retreat into simply managing what is apparently possible for us to manage. Ideology, social inertia, or *das Sittlichkeit* ["the social order"] give us an "out" by which we can surrender morality on the grounds that it is rather difficult. This, in turn, shows us how little morality means to us, that even minor personal inconveniences can justify selling it off to the first bidder. Instead, we might wish to be aware of our *passivity* and our *activity*, which will lead us to gain an insight into how we can react to those two factors.

To return to our hapless trap driver, we should remember that he was not obviously a consenting partner in the horses assigned to him. He is, at his lowest, an agent who simply manages

[17] *Taking Responsibility for Ourselves: A Kierkegaardian Account of the Freedom-Relevant Conditions Necessary for the Cultivation of Character*, p. 228, P. Carron

[18] "The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage" from *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, p. 402, ed. [V. Eremita]

[19] *Theological Existence To-day!*, p. 9, K. Barth

[20] *Propaganda: the Formation of Men's Attitudes*, p. 6, J. Ellul

[21] "The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage" from *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, p. 402, ed. [V. Eremita]

[22] *Kierkegaard and the Question Concerning Technology*, p. 51, C. B. Barnett

[23] "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and a Method of "Virtue Ethics"", R. C. Roberts, from *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, p. 147

what has been handed to him—his horses will drive ahead in a certain direction unless he finds a method by which to direct them, whether this is through the proper management of their strengths or the use of violence; he is at the potential of being overrun by his desires and must learn to control them before he can act as a self at all—his desires will reach out into reality in a certain direction unless he finds a method by which to direct them, whether this is through the proper management of their strengths or the use of violence against the self. Here, it should be clear that "not choosing" is not always an option.

Indeed, to suggest that we could never choose at all, i.e., to aim for *ataraxia*, is to simply assert that nothing matters to us in this world and that any particular rational flourish (because, in some sense, we can create rational flourishes towards many different ends that are apparently incommensurable[24]) is enough to turn our heads. Ironically, we end up in the same situation as the utilitarian or some other "aesthetic" ethicist, who extends their human empathy as far as to consider the other *qua* a number in a calculation. We might criticise the abstracted self of one who, say, initially sees the attractiveness of Hinduism before having their head turned by Christianity after some gentle propositional reflection—as if such things are theories which one can flit between without much influence on the self that flits so thoughtlessly.

In this sense, the driver must remember that the horses drive on because the horses *ought* to drive on; our passions cannot be suppressed in a cartoonish asceticism that is realised cross-legged underneath an exotic tree, but rather express a basic *fact* of the person which must find an object within creation. The older style of self-denial in the mode of the legalist is an error—while prudent in its zealous excessiveness, the one who denies absolutely in an attempt to follow the Absolute also denies the Absolute in the absolute denial of the Absolute's creation; to retreat into a mock-Christianity which feels nothing about the world is to say that God's creation is worth no admiration and deserves less than a modicum of our attention.

This is a part of the essential transfiguration in Kierkegaard, Paul, and Wesley that evades the analysis of the secular observer[25]—the movement from the unfreedom of the legalist to the freedom of the law-follower is one that can only be understood when one has emerged from "the cave". As we walk the path from Jerusalem to Jericho, we should be clear on what it is we walk through: the path is not the unfettered indulgence in our desires and passions, i.e., "the aesthetic", or the unfettered rejection of our desires and passions, i.e., a certain form of "the ethical", but rather the appropriate expression of the self in a direction which allows for genuine well-being, genuine human flourishing, and genuine expression. The oft-misunderstood Climacan quip rings through: "subjectivity is truth".

> "Subjectivity is "exactly equally important" as objective, propositional truth, and is to be preferred only if one is forced to choose between them. But when, one might ask, would such a choice be forced on us? The answer, I think, is that the choice is forced on us when we are told that objective truth requires the complete suppression of subjectivity, the adoption of the "view from nowhere" in which I put aside emotions and passions and resolve to believe only what can be demonstrated on the basis of objective reason… From a Kierkegaardian standpoint, the person who chooses

[24] *After Virtue*, p. 1–5, A. MacIntyre; *Training in Christianity and the Edifying Discourse which 'Accompanied' It*, p. 128, [Anti-Climacus], ed. S. Kierkegaard

[25] And, bear in my mind, my reader, that "not everyone who says 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven".

> pure objectivity loses the truth both in life and in belief; the person who chooses subjectivity has a chance at truth in both arenas."[26]

The activist has no interest in all this and makes no effort to ensure that we achieve any of these values—and why would they? When we understand the other merely in terms of technical or transactional utility,[27] then the other is reduced to a function which can be drawn upon, even if only in a brutish show of strength in a wave of humanity brought to hell—and therefore is to be untrusted as an agent of nihilism.

The driver, aware that some things are out of his control, will assert control by identifying the source of his power and the possibilities that are available to him in the fact of his concrete existence and subjectivity. What we should hope for, says the minor pseudonym Petrus Minor, is that we might follow in the path of the *extraordinarius* by identifying a point outside of ourselves which allows for genuine movement and genuine transcendence and transfiguration.[28] This Archimedean point is out of reach for the activist: their cause is one of immediacy and does not allow for the unfolding of the individual into something greater than the dual nihilism of feckless passionate desire and of mass conformist despair, therefore they cannot allow for genuine movement which allows the individual to discover themselves in accordance with their ground and their τέλος. Not all of us—in fact, not many at all of us—are called to prophesy and, therefore, learning to follow, to obey,[29] and to accept that some things are beyond the pure expression of brutish and ignorant power which flows from all individuals *authentically* and *passionately* is the mode by which understands the genuine freedom of Christ: "the *recognizable* individual [is he] who wills something and will take risks for it."[30]

The commitment to a particular τέλος allows one to grow into transfiguration, where the activist is powerless (and furious) that new information or even immediate danger cannot draw the one into an inauthentic expression of the self; the commitment to a particular teleology allows one to resist immediate "stirring,"[31] which ceases personal development and the pursuit of concrete goals that will lead to concrete achievements. This hope is the realist—*not idealist!*—expression of the self in time, reaching out passionately for that which grounds and realises the individual's passion:

> "Christianity does not lead you up to some loftier place from which you can still only survey a somewhat wider circuit; this is still only an earthly hope and a worldly prospect. No, Christianity's hope is eternity, and therefore there are light

[26] "Kierkegaard: Father of Existentialism or Critic of Existentialism?", p. 16, C. Stephen Evans

[27] *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age–A Literary Review*, p. 74 S. Kierkegaard; *The Technological Society*, p. 22, J. Ellul

[28] *The Religious Confusion of the Present Age Illustrated by Magister Adler as a Phenomenon: A Mimical Monograph*, p. 43, [P. Minor], ed. S. Kierkegaard

[29] "In this case Magister Adler, if in truth he were the *extraordinarius*, might honestly be very glad of the fact that as the highest clerical authority in the Danish Church there stands such a man as Bishop Mynster, a man who, without being cruel or narrow-minded, by his own obedience has sternly disciplined himself with the strong emphasis or gravity of seriousness to dare to require of others the universal, a man of whom it may be said with the seriousness of a Cato that he *ad majorum disciplinam institutus non ad huius seculi levitatem*; a man who very well can join in the game if only a true extraordinarius is there." *Ibid.*, p. 39

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 44

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 45

> and shadow, beauty and truth, and above all the distance of transparency in its diagram of existence."[32]

Through this hope of eternity—not a temporal hope, but the very opposite in that eternity is the opposite of a moment and not merely a great many moments[33]—the Christian can remember that they are called to a particular path which offers freedom from worldly temptation. When the activist calls for hatred against the other, the Christian remembers Christ's words "love thy neighbour"; when the activist calls for contradictory or desperate demands as their first port of call, the Christian remembers Christ's words "seek first the kingdom of God"; when the activist calls for an armed response against a shadow adversary, the Christian remembers Christ's words "turn the other cheek"; each of which are a path to the freedom of the Christian in the body of Christ is an inconvenient crowbar in the trap the activist would wedge shut. A movement by God, through Christ, to remind us that the sometimes constricting maw of practical necessity that is forced upon us by the activist (or, by extension, the wider world) is not one that is truly as constrictive as it appears—it is *always possible* to do otherwise, even if this calls for hardship.

Attendance in church breaks up the necessity of the bustling busyness of the capitalist productive society; fasting breaks up the longing for aesthetic and material excitement in the feckless or the pain of hunger in the meek; prayer breaks up the scattered sense of self that mass media throws back upon us. Indeed, Christ's promise breaks up the tangible despair that our temporal fragility and mortality reigns down upon us.[34] And all this begins with an earnest admission, as best worded by Anti-Climacus:

> "Whether it now is a help or a torment, I *will* one thing only, I will belong to Christ, I will be a Christian!"[35]

Neither I nor our dear Melancholic Dane, my reader, have made it a secret what the appropriate τέλος is—one that flesh and blood have not revealed to you and me, but rather one that rejects any humanly derived "measuring stick"[36] and reaches out to something greater. But, of course, this reaching out is a choice that you and I must make—and not one that can be found in the mouth of an activist.

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[32] *Works of Love*, p. 248, S. Kierkegaard

[33] "Eternity is the very opposite [of temporality]. It is not the opposite of a single moment in temporality (this is meaningless); it is the opposite of the whole of temporality, and with all the powers of eternity it resists temporality's becoming more." See "States of Mind in the Strife of Suffering" in *Christian Discourses*, p. 98, S. Kierkegaard

[34] *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective*, p. 128, J. Ellul

[35] *Training in Christianity and the Edifying Discourse which 'Accompanied' It*, p. 117, [Anti-Climacus], S. Kierkegaard

[36] "The Exposition" in *Training in Christianity and the Edifying Discourse which 'Accompanied' It*, p. 91, [Anti-Climacus], ed. S. Kierkegaard

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