

Intellectual Freedom Between Modernism and Postmodernism: Calmly Vacillating Between Two Kinds of Vacillation?

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"What turns people into turmoil are not the facts but their opinions on the facts": This is the claim of the stoic philosopher Epictetus about human misery. Epictetūs equates misery with "turmoil" - that is, the absence of that peace of mind (ataraxia) in which he saw happiness (just as most other ancient schools of philosophy did, like the schools of Epicurus and the skeptic Pyrrho).

The good news here is that for this very reason people have within their grasp the ability to achieve happiness. Since the facts, according to Epictetus, cannot be changed, but our attitude to the facts can. For example, the fact that we all must die is probably not so easy to change any time in near future. However, what we can change is our opinion that death were an evil: if this were not the case, death would have appeared as an evil even to Socrates, but it did not appear to him as such, as Epictetus argues.

What may appear to us as a simple and obvious evil is in fact, if we follow Epictetus, something complex; something composed of a more or less indifferent set of facts on the one hand, and an addition we contributed on the other hand, i. e. our way of 'framing' these facts; our way of positioning ourselves with regard to these facts.

This composite character of what appears simple has also been captured by David Foster Wallace, in his beautiful speech, *This Is Water*. For instance when driving, Foster Wallace remarks, we may get terribly angry with some other driver who forces us to brake in a risky overtaking manoeuvre. Yet it is possible to overcome this seemingly obvious and legitimate turmoil: by imagining a different scenario – we can for example imagine, as Foster Wallace suggests, that the other driver has a dying child on the back seat which he desperately tries to bring as quickly as possible to the nearest hospital.

With this new imagination in place we have given the matter at hand a new framework that makes it, so to speak, appear in a different light. This re-framing allows us to see that also previously we had been framing the matter – only back then, we used a sinister framework that led us into turmoil. The only difference is, that we were not aware of this previous framework. It occurred 'naturally', all by itself – as natural as the water the fish swim in. Hence the title of Foster Wallace's speech: we, too, 'swim' in our anger, our envy, our jealousy, fear or anger, and so on, with the same apparent naturalness like fish in water. What we do not notice is the fact that, in contrast to the fish, it is us, who give the seemingly annoying matter the 'fluid of annoyance', in the first place. Our water is composed of the unnoticed additions to the factual matter at hand.

From this, one could draw a first conclusion: the more different framings we are able to give a matter, the more we become aware of our own framing, and the more flexible we become. That is, the easier it becomes to switch between different framings.

For example, apart of our imagination of the father and the dying child, we could develop another one, for example, that the reckless driver were a disguised policeman who pursues a criminal (and depending on our attitude towards the police, we would then be either happy that we are protected, or swear that the damned cop puts our life at risk only in order to catch a thief). With every new imagination our agility and awareness would increase, and proportionately to this also our inability to decide for the 'right' framing. According to the sceptic philosopher Pyrrho, precisely this would be our happiness. Acknowledging the fact that our inability to decide for the 'proper' framing produces a superb balance in our mental life, we would, as ignorant sceptics, enjoy a wonderful peace of mind. "What do I know?" ("Que scay je?"), this is the question that the modern Pyrrhonist Michel de Montaigne took as his motto. And thus he did not boast about his ignorance of worldly facts, but rather enjoyed his indecision between different framings that appeared to him as equally possible framings for the facts at hand.

An interesting question emerges at this point, namely, whether all orders are of the same kind, so that a single framing would necessarily, and always, appear like water, completely natural and insurmountable, whereas only with a second framing our ability to relativize the first would arise – a skill that would grow with each additional framing. Or whether there is a fundamental difference between the two types of framing, so that certain framings would necessarily lead us into ‘gloomy passions’ and into the corresponding affective immobility of obsession – whereas other framings, by principle, would not. Given this, the latter framings, even if they were our only framings, would not put us into turmoil.

The position of Freud and Lacan on this issue would be the latter: There are framings that convulse while there are others that do not. Only a certain type of framing is therefore for us like water – so to speak, the unnoticed fluid of our unfortunate passions, or our passionate misfortune (according to the pun, commented by Freud, “Eifersucht ist eine Leidenschaft, die mit Eifer sucht, was Leiden schafft.”/ “Jealousy is a passion that zealously seeks what creates suffering”).

The imagination in the sense of Epictetus, i.e. our unnoticed addition to the facts, would be for Freud and Lacan ultimately a very specific one – and always the same – namely, the imagination about the enjoyment of the Other. We can endure anything but one thing: that the Other had been exempted from that very frustration that we had to accept – for example, when we had to learn that mere wishing does not help. The Other becomes unbearable to us when it appears as if he had not had to accept this lesson of life; as if he had an entirely unproblematic life in a wishful world without the reality principle, as if he lived in a world of unrestrained enjoyment. This unrestrained, unproblematically enjoying Other is ultimately the only thing that brings our imagination into the state of producing a turmoil: for it is not just that the Other enjoys while we cannot; but rather, that we cannot enjoy precisely because he does. It becomes his fault that we cannot enjoy; he is the cause of our ‘castration’; he is the ‘thief of our enjoyment.’ All the misfortunes of this world touch us only ‘more or less’; yet the absolute evil emerges when we elevate sad facts, by means of our imagination, to the dignity of our castration.

(This would be the negative counterpart to Lacan’s formula of sublimation as the “elevation of the object to the dignity of the Thing”. Further, it would be the opposite process to that described by Freud as the goal of the psychoanalytic treatment: the transformation of “hysterical misery” into “normal misfortune”.)

Thus, we would have won two different figures of exit from the order of “water” : a non-directional, pluralistic, and directional, dualistic one. We might well say, without major exaggeration, that the first figure is the typical

postmodern figure, while the second figure is characteristic of modernity. From the perspective of the first, postmodern figure, the second, modern one would still harbour distinctly damp patches of undried passions. For modernity still believes in the superiority of one idea, or one framing, over the other. Yet it is precisely this idea of the superiority of one idea over another which creates turmoil, according to the postmodern viewpoint. This idea of superiority would have to be dissolved in order to allow for happy indifference. Only when all ideas have equally fallen into indifference and meaninglessness, peace would prevail, and tranquility of our soul arise.

However, from the perspective of the second, modern figure, it is precisely this idea which has to be regarded as the non-dried water-remainder of the first, post-modern figure: Nothing must mean anything; nothing is allowed to be more true than something else - otherwise truth would emerge as the thief of the enjoyment of all others. But who says, on the other hand, that truth is so hard to bear? Is truth an instance of enjoyment, something absolute - as it is understood by those religions who believe to possess an absolute, transcendent truth, and therefore difficult to access?

Is truth not rather, as the sciences teach us every day, something that is completely immanent, profane, secular, transitory, easily available and easily surpassable, just as smartphones or coffee machines that are surpassed almost every day by a newer, better smartphone or by a newer, hipper coffee machine? Is truth therefore not something entirely common, thoroughly castrated? So what would be so bad about being surpassed by something true? Why should we feel deprived of enjoyment and unable to congratulate the lucky winner, fairly, as good sports? For modernism, postmodernism would be a neurotic who can bear no truth, because he is a sore loser.

With these two figures in mind, I start observing myself and cannot conceal from myself a certain feeling of happiness and intellectual freedom. I vacillate between these two figures and hesitate to decide for one. And just in this indecision, this hesitation, I would, according to Epictetus and Pyrrho, experience tremendous happiness: so to speak, the ultimate peace of the peaces of mind, the ataraxia of the ataraxias. What particularly pleases me is the fact that I cannot define the pattern according to which I actually vacillate when vacillating between these two patterns. I can not tell whether I feel so free because I have gained mobility between two ideas that are, by this very fact of my mobility, equally devalued and no longer able to impress me; or if I rather became able to shake off a bad idea, thanks to another idea, which is true and thus not unsettling or threatening. I vacillate between these two types of vacillation and thoroughly enjoy the fact that I am not able to reveal even to myself to which of these two types my vacillation belongs.