

Notes on the Impossibility of Life in Contemporary Society

Introduction

This is a running commentary, (which will be updated periodically), on how life has been rendered impossible in modern society.

Also there may be ideas about how to fight this and make it possible. But no promises.

What do we mean 'life has become impossible'? With Artaud we can say that we are all being suicided by society.

To live as a human being is not simply to eat and fornicate. It isn't to live a life of controlled hedonism. To live as human being is to be ethical. That is to use our reason and to consider what we do, its impact on us and on our fellow-men and women. And to act in such a way that by our actions we show a minimum of care and love for our fellow-men, so that, at least, we do not interfere with *their* ability to live a human life to the full.

This is not a religion. I am not talking about saving anyone. The basis of the ethical position I am outlining is that I recognise other people are *like me* and I am determined that by my actions I will not interfere with their ability to live a fully human life. I am not claiming to *teach* them how to do that; I am simply trying not to act so as to make it harder for them. Whether or not they do live a fully human life is up to them. (Teaching people how to do that, helping those who find it hard, to what extent these things are possible or wise etc are all other subjects).

The 'fully human life' I mean is one that involves the exercise of our human faculties. The faculties which seem to be to be at the depths or at the heart of being human are freedom and reason. The exercise of reason and freedom seems somehow to lead to virtue. A life which is caring towards oneself and open towards one's fellow-men. (I will use 'men' sometimes in an anthropological sense meaning human beings rather than male human beings). We may not fully know what life is about but when we think about how we can live it seems that the sensible thing is to live with care to oneself and to be open and friendly towards our fellow-men. This is what I call virtue.

So. When I say that I seek to act ethically and say that by this I mean that I do not interfere with the ability of other people to live their lives to the full I mean that I would like to avoid acting in ways which interfere with the ability of other people to exercise their freedom and reason in ways which lead to virtue. Of course if someone is exercising his or her freedom in such a way as to try to kill me that is a different matter. I may well want to interfere with their plans at that point.

One of the features of this society, by which I mean contemporary (2011) life in the UK, is how very hard it is to live an ethical life. All the time in both the fields of work and consumption it is the case that a person is

being invited to act unethically, to act in such a way which interferes with the freedom and reason of other people who I have no reason to believe are trying to harm me.

This text is a running commentary on these problems as I encounter them in my daily life.

7 October 2011 - The world of work

This is a good example. I work as a 'web developer'. That is I write code (and mark-up) to create web sites. I do contract work, partly because it is better paid than regular employment but also because it gives me more freedom. I can take time off between contracts and when in work I tend to have more autonomy than a permanent employee.

In the last couple of days I've had two conversations with recruitment consultants about new contract work. In one case I've been offered an interview which I am going to have to decline. In the other the agent is keen but I will not be taking it forwards. Both contracts are unethical.

In one case the work involves building a web site for an educational publisher. This publisher is a conglomerate of several publishing companies brought together to target the education sector. What is wrong with that you may ask? The proper answer is perhaps quite long but in a sentence of two; the education system in this country is not one which recognises the freedom or indeed reason of young people. It is a system of manipulation in which young people, designated as 'pupils' and endlessly referred to as 'children' and, in the rude version, 'the kids', receive a training in docilisation. Young people are not engaged with but rather *en masse* marshalled about and forced to jump through hoops, a process with the writer Ivan Illich refers to as the 'ritualization of progress' - each jump through a hoop rendering them that much more docile and more prepared to jump through the next hoop without refusing. Rather than a training in ethics and virtue based on the freedom and reason inherent in people it is a training in compliance and acceptance of power. As Illich points out there is an irony that in a society which claims to be democratic schooling is characterised by the manipulation and control of young people defined as 'children' and denuded of adult rights. In short then (and readers who are interested could read my paper on Illich in the essays section of this site or better still read *Deschooling Society* by Ivan Illich pub. Marion Boyars 1971) the education system in this country is one which denudes young people of their freedom and tries to suffocate freedom rather than engage with it. As someone trying to be ethical I do not want to be part of that.

The other contract possibility was for the Oxford University Press. (This is a publishing company which publishes books and academic journals. I know that many of the journals will be actively pushing narratives that I know to be harmful, for example the ADHD-stimulant drugging narrative which I discuss elsewhere on this site, but overall I would in theory accept a contract here, while having some misgivings, because publishing is in

some sense still to do with freedom and reason, however corrupted by ideology and power the world of academia is in the West). But, the problem here was of a different order. When the recruitment agent confirmed the interview she also said the client would like me to complete a written technical test before attending the interview. The idea is that I would then bring it to the interview. I've looked at it and it would take about 1 or 1 1/2 hours to complete. What is my problem with this? I don't object to being asked to complete a technical test when I attend for an interview but having it sent out in advance is a different kind of dynamic. It shows a lack of respect. I am not first being met, a hand-shake for a potential colleague and then a polite 'would you mind completing this test', but already and before I have even met the department manager my behaviour is being micro-controlled. And in my own time and place. There are different angles from which to analyse this gambit but one striking feature is how it eliminates the I-thou relationship between myself the manager who will conduct the interview. When I arrive I am already under his orders. I arrive, not like a consultant being seen on equal terms, but like a school-child with my homework. It is (at least) emotionally lazy on the part of the manager.

It also, incidentally, illustrates how the power relations which are in this society established in schools are used by people in positions where they can exercise power to shape those relations. School is the bedrock of power relations. People who want to grow in freedom and reason at some point realise that school is not about being human and they eschew school and its practices. Others do not. They persist in them. (In passing if you analyse this in some depth there is also a sort of shabbiness to it which extends to a problem with boundaries around sex. This is because the department manager is treating me as an object, as 'just another number', rather than making a real face to face contact).

So I won't be taking that job (or going to the interview).

Part of me wants to ask why? Why can the people in the web design agency who have contracted with the educational publishing conglomerate not have *thought* about this? Anyone who thinks and looks into education will see that it, as practiced in the West, now, is working against freedom and reason. The text-book industry is a racket in itself. Do people not think? Ethics has been airbrushed out of business life it seems. But I still don't really understand what goes through the minds of those who make these decisions. At some point they must abdicate responsibility. In that moment they throw away their own freedom too.

And the sleazy IT manager at Oxford University Press. Why not have some manners? Some decorum? Some dignity? Some respect?

What is this general and wide-spread abandonment of ethics?