

A Vexatious Circle
Thesis by Charlotte Thrane
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‘No one who has never seen himself surrounded on all sides by nothing but the sea can have a true conception of the world and his own relation to it.’, J.W. Goethe, [1].

Rodney Graham’s film *Vexation Island*, takes place on an exotic, desert island. A man (the artist himself) is sleeping in the sand, while the camera explores him and the island. The man is wounded on his forehead and one wonders whether he was hurt in a shipwreck or if the parrot sitting nearby suddenly attacked him. Why is he there and why is he sleeping? After observing the monotonous narrative for quite a while, one is surprised when something finally happens that might provide an answer: the man wakes up, looks around and gets up. He moves directly towards the nearest palm tree and grabs it in an attempt to shake off a coconut. At last a coconut is loosened, but it hits his forehead and knocks him out, so that he falls back to his original position. This is the moment where one realises that one is watching a loop.

As well as hurting himself, the character on the island somehow causes the viewer a great amount of irritation whilst observing his situation. The title of the work indeed suggests vexation, and one can wonder why watching the film worries and annoys its audience. What makes *Vexation Island* vexatious?

If an animal were in a similar situation, it would not be nearly as painful to watch. There is nothing worrying or peculiar about an animal sleeping, waking up, finding food and going back to sleep, this is what animals normally do. Human beings ultimately do the same, but they are aware of themselves and their situation, and therefore able to question it and search for its meaning. Knowing that the man on the island is (or normally would be) aware of his situation underlines its absurdity and causes irritation because one knows that he is stuck in this situation and (conscious of it or not) unable to change it. The relation between the island and the sea could symbolise the relation between the self and the world, and the behaviour of this isolated stranger somehow depicts a familiar situation. Furthermore, a circle or a loop is by definition an infinite structure, and therefore possibly problematic and agitating for a finite being to comprehend.

The stranger’s actions seem pre-determined in that he cannot redirect them and finds himself caught in a circle that loops just like the film itself. He is hungry and has to find food (which seems to be available only in the form of coconuts on *Vexation Island*) and is therefore forced to shake them off a tree. His pre-occupation with present concerns prevents him from realising that he might avoid knockout – and thereby break the circle – by moving aside or finding another method for finding food (i.e. to catch and eat the parrot). As such he is determined by a pattern, unable to see beyond present concerns and therefore blind to see himself being caught in a circle, even though he might consider himself a conscious being.

The loop functions as a depiction of a repetitive action that ultimately eliminates its own purpose as well as referring to a state of timelessness, and that of a man situated in a pre-determined situation. The absurdity (and wit) of the work lies in its depiction of a man knocking himself out in a most prosaic way; through the daily work of earning a living. The dialectic of identity and self-alienation (blindness) is depicted as a comic image of labour, which by this means comments on the circular and Sisyphean nature of life and the everyday.

The timelessness of the situation is similar to that of an endless circle and creates references to other times and places. *Vexation Island* depicts a man in an unfortunate situation. One wonders whether things happen *to* him or if he makes them happen. Maybe he deserves to be hit by coconuts because he causes his situation or because he is too ignorant to advance or free himself from it. In any case, Graham's piece can be read as an example of an all too familiar and painful condition that most would want to avoid being in (even though it seems to be paradise at a first glance). The presentation of the protagonist in an oblivious condition prompts the viewer to reflect on the nature of conscious versus unconscious states of being. If only the man on Vexation Island could change his situation.

A Conscious Being in the World

'For everything begins with consciousness and nothing is worth anything except through it.', A. Camus, [2].

'The mind of man, which he did not ask to be given, demands a reason and a meaning – this is its self-defining cause – and yet it finds itself in the midst of a radically meaningless existence.', J-P.Sartre, [3].

Human existence is two-sided, holding both bodily and mental existence. Since Plato, it has been generally accepted that mind is distinct from body and that the two forms of existence supplement each other. Ultimately, human existence cannot be reduced to one of the forms. The mind can be seen as a substance that is not extended in space, and thus is distinct from any physical substance. The essence of a mental substance is thinking.

Thinking leads to thought and humans are able to express their thoughts and feelings by the use of language. Communicating with the world and other people influences the mind and introduces new thoughts (and actions). Physical sensations affect both body and mind and cause humans to feel i.e. pain, to moan, and react, and thereby makes the individual (causally) influence the physical world by its reaction. The physical world, in turn, influences human minds through its influence on the senses. In short (by Descartes) described as transactions from the mental sphere to the physical, and from the physical to the mental.

Being conscious can be explained as experiencing in the effort to know what is going on around one because one is able to use bodily senses and mental powers. On a philosophical level, consciousness has further implications. The mind of man does not only know what is going on around him, it finds *itself* in the midst of an existence and is therefore aware of itself and its situation. The human mind becomes conscious of being human in the world. A conscious mind is a mind that is studying itself and its world. By being aware of its own situation, the conscious individual does not only believe to understand, it also questions the status of things. A conscious mind does not only want to know the world, it also wants it to have meaning. A conscious mind believes in its ability to reflect, reason and conclude. One purpose of reasoning is to increase the degree of reasonable confidence that one has in the truth of a conclusion. Reasons for action enter practical thinking as the contents of beliefs, desires, and other mental states. But not all the reasons one has need motivate the corresponding behaviour.

‘Of whom and what indeed can I say: “I know that!” This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge and the rest is construction...Between the certainty I have of my existence and the content I try to give to that assurance, the gap will never be filled.... In psychology as in logic, there are truths but no truth.’, A. Camus, [4].

Albert Camus explains consciousness as a need to attempt filling in the gaps beyond the sense of the self and the world, by constructing illusions and ideas. Human consciousness searches for meaning and reason that is not implied in the world and ultimately tries to create a form of coherence and meaning. Man defines himself by his make-believe as well as by his impulses. He might experience his ideas, sensations and feelings as reality, but ultimately they are nothing but his own construction. Humans lead practical lives, with what they include of causal behaviour and interpret them discursively in a way so that they seem meaningful. To interpret, re-evaluate, classify, re-invent, imitate or find meaning all have one thing in common; they are ways of understanding and articulating one’s own experience as a form of narrative activity and thereby creating one’s own notion of oneself and the world.

Until man dies, he is determined (condemned or blessed) to exist with consciousness that both causes him pain and allows him to experience happiness. This is an involuntary condition, which implies questioning existence, knowing one’s limitations and sensing meaninglessness and absurdity. Not only does consciousness question itself and the world, it also questions the reasons for its own being.

The longing for understanding and creating coherence stirs up paradoxes, since it only occurs when realising a lack of coherence and meaning. By believing in something apparently true, the existence of the false is recognised and thereby transforms what one thought was true into false. By reflecting on one’s situation it is unavoidable to recognise

absurdity. A man conscious of the absurd is forever bound to it. ‘...we fall into the ridiculous contradiction of a mind that asserts total unity and proves by its very assertion its own difference and the diversity it claimed to resolve.’, [5].

Absurdity

‘You describe it [the world] to me and you teach me to classify it. You enumerate its laws and in my thirst for knowledge I admit that they are true. You take apart its mechanism and my hope increases. At the final stage you teach me that this wondrous and multicolored universe can be reduced to the atom and that the atom itself can be reduced to the electron. All this is good and I wait for you to continue. But you tell me of an invisible planetary system in which electrons gravitate around a nucleus... And you give me the choice between a description that is sure but that teaches me nothing and hypotheses that claim to teach me but that are not sure.’, A. Camus, [6].

Existentialists such as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre articulate what perhaps most feel, by depicting and discussing the absurdity and meaninglessness of existence.

Camus focuses on the concept of the absurd, since existential absurdity for him lies in the fact that there is always an imperfect correlation between human intention and reasoning, and therefore an impossibility of achieving certitude. Man is longing to understand the world, but ‘[u]nderstanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human, stamping it with his seal.’, [7]. A paradox arises because the world cannot be reduced to the human, the rational, since it is exactly defined by *not* being human. Absurdity is born of the confrontation between the human need for unity and certainty, and its encounter with the irrationality of the world:

‘The world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world.’, [8].

According to Camus, absurdity lies in the encounter between two opposing poles. This implies that unless one becomes the other – which is impossible – absurdity will remain, and is thereby considered embedded in existence. Man’s nostalgia for knowledge does not imply that it is to be immediately satisfied, which means that one can only hypothesize and question why humans appear pre-destined to interact with the world and the people in it. Certainty only presents itself in the fact that a life is a line of events stretched from birth to death, and a human being is born and must eventually die. Humans are embedded in life and forever confronted with the absurdity of existing in the world. Absurdity is a factor innate in human existence and can only be escaped by dying. A sense of knowledge might occur; only to eventually confirm the notion that knowing is believing, and what seems to be rational is

nothing but a construction. Human beings exist within an eternal paradox, which their consciousness allows them never to forget.

A key question is how it is feasible to deal with eternal paradoxes and the pain of meaninglessness in the vexatious circle of life; whether one can find a way out of despair that will reaffirm the value of personal existence, and offer the possibility of a life lived with dignity and authenticity.

'Living, naturally, is never easy. You continue making the gestures commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is habit. Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering.', [9].

Meaninglessness

'Throughout our lives we accumulate a body of facts that are true of us - our "facticity" - but during our lives we remain free to envision new possibilities, to reform ourselves and to reinterpret our facticity in the light of new projects and new ambitions - our "transcendence". This indeterminacy means that we can never *be* anything, and when we try to establish ourselves as something particular - whether a social role (policeman, waiter) or a certain character (shy, intellectual, cowardly) - we are in "bad faith". Bad faith is erroneously viewing ourselves as something fixed and settled... but it is also bad faith to view oneself as being of infinite possibilities and ignore the always restrictive facts and circumstances within which all choices must be made.', [10].

In his magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre introduced the notion "mauvaise foi", or "bad faith". For Sartre, bad faith is one's inauthentic and self-deceptive refusal to admit to (oneself and others) one's full freedom, thereby avoiding the anxiety of making decisions and evading responsibility for one's actions and attitudes. One form of self-deception identified by Sartre is to embrace other people's views in order to avoid having to form one's own, another is to disregard options (and thereby the possibility of a future transcendence) so that one's life appears predetermined to move in a fixed direction. Generally, bad faith is characterised by self-deception, a lie to yourself. But how can one lie to oneself? By not being consciously aware of such intentions to lie or deceive. For the individual in bad faith, the nature of such a lie 'is not recognized by the liar as his intention.', [11]. Therefore, the liar finds himself as the victim of his own self-deception and lives in falsehood.

For Sartre, authenticity or good faith is when an individual presents itself with what it is not and is not afraid of controlling life. In short, humans must choose between good and bad faith; to master or be mastered.

In *Nausea*, Sartre introduces the antihero Antoine Roquentin, an existentialist hero, who is free from any conventional expectations of what human nature requires in a given situation, and does not passively accept the role into which he has been socialized, but actively and freely tests his future and has the courage to question what others blindly accept. He is not lying to himself, he is not in bad faith like the people around him, but confronts himself with his anxieties and the pain of meaninglessness.

Roquentin is a bored and often nauseated man who is horrified at his own existence and running out of things to live for. Any action he engages in is subject to complete meaninglessness and therefore he concludes that he has no right to exist:

‘And it was true, I had always realized that: I hadn’t any right to exist. I had appeared by chance, I existed like a stone, a plant, a microbe. My life grew in haphazard way and in all directions. Sometimes it sent me vague signals; at other times I could feel nothing but an inconsequential buzzing.’, [12].

Existing like a stone, feeling only an inconsequential buzzing now and then reduces existence to physical presence and regards feelings and thoughts as petty self-conceit. Roquentin is not only deconstructing and judging his own existence; he looks with wonder at the people around him, in an attempt to find justification for their activities. Four men are playing cards:

‘What a peculiar occupation: it doesn’t look like a game, or a rite, or a habit. I think they do that to pass the time, nothing more. But time is too large, it refuses to let itself be filled up. Everything you plunge into it goes soft and slack. That gesture, for example, of the red hand falteringly picking up the cards: it’s all flabby. It ought to be unstitched and cut down.’, [13].

Roquentin believes that any action, any gesture must be rejected as useless, since the chief purpose of being seems to be to pass time. Passing time is like waiting for what one knows will never happen, and turns life into a perpetual waiting for the next moment. This situation depicts the uselessness of any action and thereby eliminates its justification.

One by one Roquentin is offered various traditional means of escaping his unpleasant situation, and his examination and rejection of them illustrates how anything can be an object of such an existential deconstruction. Before arriving at these conclusions, his historical research on the Marquis de Rollebon had been justifying his existence. He then finds that historical research only pays attention to what have already passed (and is now death) and is therefore trivial. Therefore he brings the research to an end, which makes him feel empty (for a while) until he receives a letter from his long lost love that extends meaninglessness. After four years of absence, she asks him to meet her in Paris and he imagines that his life will attain meaning if she asks him to stay. But she has only called him to confirm her own change in realising that love does not exist, because relationships do not contain any “perfect

moments”, [14], but is a matter of two people attempting to fulfil each other’s expectations. Roquentin sets off back to the little town of Bouville, feeling nothing and well aware of the non-existence of love. He realizes that he must reject other parts of himself such as his love of travelling, because adventure is experience and therefore without justification. The life of Bouville – the little town he lives in – is clearly unacceptable and he decides to move to Paris to find new meaning. The novel ends here, but it seems likely that his search will go on. Roquentin will never find justification anywhere and will always search for it, since he is not able to accept any action or condition as meaningful, [15].

Sartre and Roquentin conclude that neither the experience of the outer world nor the examination of the inner world can give meaning or justification to existence. Therefore, human beings continue to deceive themselves in their search for objectives that will prove their right to exist and make life pleasant.

Although the antihero is in good faith and does not deceive himself, his understanding of meaninglessness causes him great pain. Knowing the secret, feeling the void, confronting himself with the ultimate meaninglessness crushes the hero, even if it brings him closer to authenticity and freedom. The question is whether the acceptance of total meaninglessness is a means for humans to deal with absurdity if they are to attain a life of quality and happiness. Ultimately, the existentialist antihero suffers great pain as well as being incapable of freeing himself completely from being part of the society he attempts distancing himself from. An extreme level of deconstruction can make meaning disappear altogether, so that all that remains is a notion of disjointed entities. Even if the antihero feels that his life is a life of dignity and authenticity, it seems unfeasible for him to find happiness or meaning. He does not believe in such things.

One could argue whether an individual, to attain a life of value and happiness, can create *new* meaning on top of already existing meaning, in favour of constantly disregarding and evading any idea of the self and the world.

A Multiplicity of Meanings

Friedrich Nietzsche is an example of a man who, in the end, completely substituted the meaning of his surroundings with that of his own. Nietzsche went through the same journey as Roquentin, went through the ultimate act of deconstruction and destruction until he reached a point of realising that there was nothing left to tear apart. He had come close to a total devaluation of humanity and knew nothing but to push on to its limits. If he had not found some other direction he would at this time have reached an end. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is the

resolution of a long-sustained intellectual crisis, in which Nietzsche went beyond his nihilist conclusions and discovered that one must create one's own meaning. In favour of deconstructing anything potentially meaningful, and believing that there is no truth, no meaning, one can decide to create a whole new meaning.

For Nietzsche, there is no pre-existing or universal truth or meaning, and therefore man needs to create his own. Truth is an expression, which is created on a personal basis as a decision of a way of living. It is a place where one can protect and preserve oneself, and from where one can search for a life of value and meaning. Truth will make man happy and the happy man is the meaning and justification of existence. Joy is the one thing that requires no justification for Nietzsche, the one thing that is its own justification. He who attains joy will love life however much pain it contains and will want it eternally, again and again. He might be stuck in a condition like that of the protagonist on *Vexation Island*, but for him it will not be vexatious. For Nietzsche, joy is meaning and truth is found only in joy.

‘Isn’t it the discovery that no truth is discoverable except the truth which *you yourself are*? that there is no truth (sense, meaning) in the world except the truth (sense, meaning) *you yourself give it*? that truth is a concept belonging to the human mind and will and that apart from the human mind and will there is no such thing as ‘truth’?, [16].

To accept one's imagination, dreams and inner world as one's truth or reality, is to recognise that one – as a human being – cannot survey every element and every detail of the so-called objective world, but that one is rather a puny, finite existence in an enormous infinity. It is to accept a life of happiness and meaning, rather than a life of suffering and longing for one day achieving the knowledge of a metaphysical truth.

For Nietzsche, joy is the feeling that a resistance, which causes fear, is overcome. ‘And when Nietzsche came to understand fear as the feeling of absence of power, he was left with a single motivating principle for all human actions: the will to power.’, [17]. The meaning of life would then be to transform the chaos of life into a continual self-overcoming of life by continual increase of power, and to experience in an even greater degree the joy which is synonymous with this self-overcoming.

‘What is the greatest thing you can experience? ...The hour when you say: ‘What good is my happiness? It is poverty and dirt and a miserable ease. But my happiness should justify experience itself!’’, [18].

Willing power does not equal lusting for power. To transform the chaos of life into a self-overcoming requires that one continually re-evaluates the value of life in one's way of living.

‘Truly, I say to you: Unchanging good and evil does not exist! From out of themselves they must overcome themselves again and again.’, [19].

If existence really *is* meaningless and only humans want and can provide meaning, the search for certainty (truth) is as much a subjective, self-invented way of filling up time as creating one's own meaning. The two means might even be the same.

New meaning can be created and believed in in different degrees of intensity. A personal meaning or truth can be considered supplementary to a pre-existing (so-called) objective reality, or it can replace the already existing completely. One can modify or substitute the pre-existent. If there was no belief in at least a few basic axioms (such as the laws of physics, love or the existence of time) every moment would have to be defined from whatever present circumstances, and so existence would resemble a constant condition of shock. It might be self-conceit to create new meaning, but Nietzsche argues that since there is no certainty of a higher truth, there can be a point in creating one.

The True and the False

'To give life a meaning: that has been the grand endeavour of all who have preached 'truth'; for unless life is *given* a meaning it has none. At this level, truth is not something that can be proved or disproved: it is something which you *determine upon*, which, in the language of the old psychology, you *will*. It is not something waiting to be discovered, something to which you submit or at which you halt: it is something you *create*, it is the expression of a particular kind of life and being which has, in you, ventured to assert itself.', F. Nietzsche, [20].

In his book *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, Gilles Deleuze analyses the structure and implications of narrative in cinema. In the chapter *The Powers of the False*, Deleuze introduces two systems of the image, from the point of view of descriptions (organic and crystalline regime) and narrations (truthful and falsifying narrations). Essential to the idea of truth collapsing in favour of new narration is Nietzsche, who under the name of "will to power", substitutes the power of the false with the true, and believes the false to resolve the crisis of truth.

For Deleuze the organic regime operates within a logic which assumes a pre-existing reality, and follows the principles of continuity, chronological time and causal and logical connections. The crystalline regime is freed from those principles: '... a crystalline description stands for its object, replaces it, both creates and erases it... and constantly gives way to other descriptions which contradict, displace, or modify the preceding ones.' [21] 'It is a power of the false which replaces and supersedes the form of the true, because it poses the simultaneity of impossible presents, or the coexistence of not-necessarily true pasts.', [22]. Crystalline narration questions a system of judgement, because it is freed from this system, and thereby shatters the system.

The only purpose of truth seems to be to judge life, because truth supposedly equals the good. Life is judged and held up against truth and the good. But for Deleuze (following Nietzsche): ‘...there is no value superior to life, life is not to be judged or justified, it is innocent, it has ‘the innocence of becoming’, beyond good and evil...’, [23].

‘But it is not a matter of judging life in the name of a higher authority which would be the good, the true; it is a matter, on the contrary, of evaluating every being, every action and passion, even every value, in relation to the life which they involve.’, [24].

Deleuze, like Nietzsche, argues that the false should be in favour of the true, because it *resolves the crisis of truth*, a crisis which exists because each person has each their own truth and all the different worlds belong to the same universe, but are simply different versions of the same story.

As such, the truthful could be false. What here makes something false (in the sense of the “powers of the false”) is its being free from a system of logic, reason and chronology, a system of thought that is considered true, because it has existed for a long time. It keeps the understanding of the world within a narrow frame that does not question it but easily explains it. But if truth (in the traditional sense) only wants to judge life, then creating one’s own truth (Nietzsche) could be a more open way of perceiving life. Here is a paradox: the notion of truth becomes its opposite. Fallenness.

‘...the ‘true world’ does not exist, and, if it did, would be inaccessible, impossible to describe, and, if it could be described, would be useless, superfluous.’, [25].

Truth and Authenticity

To both Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger “truth” and “authenticity” are starting points, but they are regarded differently. For Heidegger, there does exist an absolute notion of authenticity (which might be understood to represent a form of preexistent truth). Unlike Nietzsche, Heidegger’s main concern is not restoring the quality of any individual’s life. Rather he investigates the nature of being, in order to suggest an authentic sense of being that is truly responsible and sensible. For Heidegger, human existence as it ought to be, is living up to one’s responsibility as a human and facing what oneself is and can become. To face authentically what one is and can become is possible only by confronting oneself with what is certain: death. A confrontation with death and the ultimate meaninglessness of existence causes angst, but this is the only condition that has the potential of leading to an authentic sense of being and being free. Heidegger explains that when through anxiety (of death and the

culmination of possibilities) and hearing the call of conscience (realising one's responsibility), humans face up to their "being-toward-death" and their lives can be transformed. To be authentic is the condition of being aware of and facing up to one's responsibility for what one's life is adding up to as a whole. For Heidegger, authenticity is a uniquely temporal structure and a process of unfolding possibility. It is a *state of being* that is active, harmonious, contemplative and dynamic, something filled with potentiality. As such, authenticity is the process of becoming one's possibilities; it is a state of being who contemplates itself; a being who transforms itself.

Heidegger's concern with the importance of authentic and responsible being requires the presence of something or someone universal or non-human that is superior to humans and commands them to live up to their responsibility. It seems clear that one is not required to live a life of authenticity and responsibility for one's own sake. Living up to something, suggests a system of more than one conscious or intelligent entity. For Nietzsche, it is irrelevant to be concerned with responsibility simply because he does not recognise the existence of some *external* entity in advance of the human; to which to be responsible. Humans are alone and need only be concerned with the quality of their lives.

By suggesting the existence of a preexistent notion of truth (authenticity) on which humans have no influence, Heidegger more or less talks in terms of the religious. To underline this point it is important to introduce yet another of his main concerns: thinking.

'When we ask, then, "What is it that calls on us to think?," we are looking both to what it is that gives to us the gift of this endowment, and to ourselves, whose nature lies in being gifted with this endowment.', [26].

As humans have been *given* thinking, we are merely subjects, responsible for administrating the state we have been put in. If given something, humans must be in the company of, or dependant on, the entity that gave us thinking. By defining humans as subjects, Heidegger stresses that we are not in control, but rather controlled by something which it is our task to recognise.

Nietzsche negates the existence of a higher truth by arguing that humans are alone and are the only ones to provide for themselves. Man is not given thinking; rather he attempts to master his own thoughts. Neither is he given any certainty or truth, he merely has the ability to create his own. The chief purpose for man is to overcome himself, for Nietzsche recognises that man must control in favour of being controlled.

'All living creatures are obeying creatures. And this is the second thing: he who cannot obey himself will be commanded. That is the nature of living creatures. But this is the third thing I heard: that commanding is more difficult than obeying. And not only

because the commander bears the burden of all who obey, and that this burden can easily crush him. In all commanding there appeared to me to be an experiment and a risk: and the living creature always risks himself when he commands.’, [27].

When man himself masters, he becomes subject to his own judgement and therefore truly responsible for his life. By taking the risk of constantly redefining the true and the false, the good and the evil, the right and the wrong, he is forced to be true to himself and to be in good faith. A human hoping for and leaning against final answers is a weak man, for his life then becomes a life of waiting and dependence. ‘You want to create the world before which you can kneel: this is your ultimate hope and intoxication.’, [28].

Fallenness and the Everyday

Albeit different discourses, Heidegger, Sartre and Nietzsche agree on the importance of being awake, of being conscious of one’s life and its implications if one is to live a life of dignity, authenticity or value. Being conscious is a basic condition in the search for authenticity or truth. All accuse mechanical and passive existence of being too simple, because it prevents man from achieving more, being responsible, finding meaning or attaining joy. When man follows a preset framework and disregards options, he embraces other people’s views in order to avoid having to form his own. Life appears predetermined and he loses the ability to seize on and define his own life, to be in charge of it and expand its limits; he forgets that it is even possible. For all three thinkers any event or action is emptied of meaning and reason if one is not conscious of it. If the key motivation for an action is the habit or doing it because “one” always does it, any meaning vanishes from even what could be a most significant event. It is the moment when a motivation exists for an action (be it belief in a universal or personal truth), that the action becomes meaningful.

A man not conscious of the motivation, meaning and consequence of his actions is in bad faith or in what Heidegger calls “fallenness”. Fallenness is the universal tendency of human beings to lose themselves in the everydayness of present concerns and preoccupations to such a degree that it only alienates them from their personal and unique future possibilities and reduces them to a mere “presence-at-hand”, [29], a falling into the world or a “thing” as Sartre called it.

‘The form of concern belonging to everydayness by necessity will ultimately lead to modes of inauthenticity. The uniqueness of selfhood is diffused and lost in averageness.’, [30].

The “everyday” is by name identified as something that happens daily. It can be described as the major part of a lifetime in which daily actions become manifested as routines and habits and thereby do not require constant awareness. It seems reasonable to claim that most people occupy an “everyday”; a certain pattern (with little variation) that is followed for the most part of the time. This assertion seems supported by the tremendous contrast between the existentialist antihero and the average individual. If comparing one’s life with the determination and consequence of the antihero, one’s daily actions appear inconsequential, monotonous and predictable. And that is exactly the purpose of the antihero: to remind the reader of the danger of being embedded in a cultural context to such a degree that its rules and notions are embraced and confirmed rather than questioned. The antihero is a fictional character who performs his purpose disguised as a symbol of possibilities rather than a representation of a real character.

‘The embeddedness of our existence in a cultural context explains our inveterate tendency toward inauthenticity. As we become initiated into the practices of our community, we are inclined to drift along with the crowd, doing what “one” does, enacting stereotyped roles, and thereby losing our ability to seize on and define our own lives.’, [31].

For Heidegger and Sartre the everyday becomes the manifestation of fallenness, bad faith or self-conceit because it has potential for offering a life devoid of consciousness and questioning (by offering habits and endless repetition).

A good example of fallenness is gossip or inconsequential talk. To gossip is to repeat what is heard and accepted by the public without critically examining the grounds or validity of the subject matter in question. Idle talk is merely a repetition of the conventional, an unscrutinised acceptance of the interpretations of the public. The fallen man is not concerned with understanding the grounds of what is blindly accepted as truth or fact. He is concerned instead with exploring his environments merely for the sake of discovering novelty that provides excitement, a pleasurable distraction, and knowledge simply for the sake of knowing. This example depicts what for Heidegger and Sartre lies at the crux of fallenness and bad faith: conformity.

To accept without questioning, to engage without motivation and to seek what is pleasurable and easy; Heidegger sees this as a sign that humans flee from the pain of being repeatedly confronted with death, meaninglessness and absurdity. Daily events are used for keeping the painful at a distance, by being appropriated into “small frames” in which meaning can be quite easily found and explained. A small frame provides an immediate sense of justification which is not definitive and permanent but, rather, a reminder of meaning. A habit or routine is per se an action, but one which has no surprising consequences. It is an event which has taken place several times before and is, therefore, well-known and “acquired” by

the person engaging in it. It is not an action which will result in a different state of mind, a new question or an answer, since it no longer contains anything unidentified. A habit is safe, something that allows one to be at ease in favour of continuously confronting oneself with the absurdity and meaninglessness of being. Seen from this perspective, the everyday contains habits which offer temporary escape from the realities of an otherwise meaningless existence by familiarising what could be confronting and intimidating.

Everyday life, then, in a modern society becomes pleasant, easy and pointless, because habits do not challenge but rather force repetition and, thereby, turn every moment into a waiting for the next. At this point, a life is not self-defined but, rather, lived out as a line of pre-determined events. It is easy to do what one is told, or taught to do, and not think of new options oneself. By solely engaging in routines of the everyday, man is put at a state which offers no progression but is rather a complete standstill.

The Potential of the Everyday

Alternatively, it is it seems dogmatic to pass judgment on the everyday, which (in its different forms) represents the major part of a lifetime and can itself become the manifestation of an individual's truths and beliefs.

Existentialists deconstruct and remove meaning from, especially, the everyday because they choose to make a division between the existence of an individual and it being part of a social, cultural and historical context. The individual is *free* to change its situation and is, therefore, considered *independent* of its context. Existentialists see the individual as if it was completely enclosed, not depending on others or part of a society where certain things are given (i.e. laws, rules, ethics). And, so, the existentialist's theoretical discourse commences from nothingness and not from the actual conditions of an individual. Existentialism entails that every person experiences a similar crisis (that of being confronted with meaninglessness and being horrified at own existence), it therefore, fails to recognise that some people might have found meaning, purpose and maybe even happiness in the course of the everyday.

The existentialist antihero stands out from society and creates a division between himself and the world only to engage completely in his own private unhappiness and activity of thought. He does not cease to have problems or to feel meaninglessness; he, rather, fights with loneliness too. To engage in a "normal" everyday life may not solely be an attempt to escape responsibility and embrace conformity. Alternatively, the everyday could be considered as a means of producing surplus by repeating and mimicking one's way out of

conformity, fallenness and bad faith; a less radical way than that of an antihero. One method of pursuing meaning or happiness is not naturally superior to another.

In his book *Mimesis and Alterity*, Michael Taussig discusses Walter Benjamin's ideas of the "mimetic faculty". The mimetic faculty is described as 'the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore differences, yield into and become other.', [32]. The mimetic faculty is depicted as part of man's nature and as a 'gift for seeing similarity' and a 'gift for producing similarities', [33]. The ability (or need) to mimic and imitate is considered a gift and thereby evaluated as a positive and constructive quality. It lies in the nature of man to imitate and repeat his and other's actions, because he wants to become what he mimics. Whatever seems absurd, unexplainable and therefore intimidating becomes less of a threat when mimicked. At this point, man becomes what he is scared of and so his fear diminishes. In favour of being determined by something, man attempts to determine it by becoming it. The more man mimics and becomes, the higher becomes his sense of power.

Mimicking, copying and repeating actions seem to be recognised as central parts of an individual's behaviour, either because they are considered part of the human nature (if there is one such), or because it seems a reasonable method of pursuing power, meaning and happiness. Mimicking and controlling one's being in the world is a way of making the pre-existing condition or forces one enters into work for oneself, rather than being indulged in and determined by a life that moves forward by itself. 'The ability to mime, and mime well, in other words, is the capacity to Other.', [34]. To "other" here stands for a merging of perceiver and the perceived, of viewer and viewed, although a fundamental distinction between the two.

By virtue of the communal character of human existence, humans cannot *not* participate in a world determined by the pragmatics of society and the everyday concerns that structure activities. No philosophy or belief can transform human beings' embeddedness in life, their being born into a pre-existing context and fixed inside their body - all which they are unable to change. The embeddedness in life is ultimately what is available and what has to be operated within. Like the man on *Vexation Island*, humans are affected by their present situation to such degree that it is not possible to rise above the world and know its truth or higher meaning. Being in the world and being embedded in it makes one dependent on, part of, and affected by it. One's embeddedness in a context determines one's ideas and values and eventually has effect on one's course in life.

Theoretically, it is tempting solely to see existence from an idealistic point of view. Practically, it is difficult to dismiss that a life is a line of events that are either meaningless or given meaning by an individual's or a society's notion of truth. Philosophy can function as a

reminder of existence as hard work that requires a willingness to engage and be conscious. But high ideals are not always compatible with practical living.

Routine as Constant Maintenance

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu bases his theories on empiric knowledge and material investigations (mainly questionnaires and interviews) which he integrates with a very complicated version of the classical sociological idea of a collective consciousness (“conscience collective” also called “habitus”). As a researcher of culture, he is one who most stubbornly has attempted to define the connections between social background, taste and cultural consumption. One of his main objects is to demonstrate that culture is not universal, but is one of the most important tools for the higher groups of society to maintain their privileges in relation to the lower groups. Furthermore he is interested in the way in which the individual interprets its own place in the social space, its history and its future possibilities as well as the relationship between social and cultural structures and the individual’s interpretation of them.

Bourdieu thinks structurally in that he regards the relation *between* the elements of a situation as crucial, rather than an absolute importance within the singular element (which he denies any existence of). Nothing can be separated from its context. As a result, individuals are described as reproducing social structures, whilst changing them eventually with no explicit intention to do so. The term habitus includes a stabile disposition which creates a structured world as well as offering ordering operations, combining practice with a sense of coherence and meaning. It is a mechanism situated in the body and in the unconscious which manifests itself in a sense of what one can and cannot do in certain situations. Habitus in action is like a game: it opens unlimited, creative possibilities, but it also introduces limitations. It is a pivot point which links the social structure and the behaviour of an individual. Habitus should not be seen as a norm of how one should act but, rather, as a kind of introjected cultural code which defines symbolic value in relation to cultural actions. Habitus exists somewhere between the social structure and the practice of the individual as a way of behaving. It is a result of the relationship between the consciousness of an individual and the challenges and possibilities of the structures surrounding him.

Furthermore, Bourdieu comments on the fact that most choices are not determined by personal taste but are, rather, consequences of the individual’s willingness to be shaped to fit his surroundings. The incentive of one’s actions and practice is not influenced by an eagerness to find meaning in a philosophical sense. Rather, it is determined by a fondness for a life of meaning and purpose by adjusting to one’s place in life. It seems natural and obvious

to adjust to what one has learnt and to accept the identity and rules belonging to one's situation. By adjusting to one's place within a social structure, one becomes part of a collective consciousness, one which might deal differently or less consciously with the complex questions of existence. Dealing collectively less consciously with what is painful can be an advantage or an opening for an individual who would otherwise feel overwhelmed by meaninglessness.

By introducing the term *habitus*, Bourdieu in fact attempts to re-introduce the living, active subject who has often been turned into a mechanic appendage to structures. According to Bourdieu, it requires *constant maintenance* to keep oneself and others in routines. This process happens daily in the form of conversations, idioms, reproaches, funny remarks, opinions about other people's actions and supportive or dismissive declarations. The everyday is constantly recreated due to systematic and consequent behaviour which is sometimes in great contrast to its explanations and motives. In this way the individual is very much participating in life and not just passively observing it.

Bourdieu supports the idea that humans do not exist unconsciously, but are participating in the course of their lives. Maybe life seems to be moving all by itself because it is preserved rather than being constantly re-invented. It might seem as if an individual does not make any significant decisions (but simply does what "one" does) because decisions are decided upon and lived out as constant maintenance and are therefore not easily recognisable. It is difficult to point at exactly what forms an opinion and taste in something if it is assembled by several components, such as conversations and common engagement with others. An opinion is not formed in one crucial moment, but rather through a movement of thought that constantly changes or stays almost the same. Everything is context and interaction within this context. Accepting this constant maintenance as genuine action and participation equals recognising that humans are not predictable, passive and simple, but are complex, active and advanced in the way they constantly re-evaluate and re-open situations.

Two Different Circles

'Repetition is a device to seize the wind-blown world for contemplation, in other words, to find peace, but there can be no peace because repetition is also the register of pain, and this is its truth... Even if, after a hundred repetitions, we are convinced that they have all been the same, then the hundredth repetition is different, by virtue of that insight. Repetition is a form of mimesis and mimesis is always transformative. Satiric, ironic, sarcastic, malevolent, subversive, admiring, epigonic – no mimesis is neutral, for even the mirror never lies. Repetition could be seen as an attempt to draw something productive out of the limited recourses of the self alone; repetition is a dilemma, and a dilemma is always productive. Eventually.', [35].

'If repetition makes us ill, it also heals us; if it enchains and destroys us, it also frees us, testifying in both cases its 'demonic' power. All cure is a voyage to the bottom of repetition.', [36].

At this point the understanding of the everyday becomes crucial: one can be determined by one's everyday by being stuck in it and controlled by its patterns or seize and master it by questioning and being conscious of its implications. A choice must be made between good faith and bad faith, between authenticity and fallenness, between mastering and being mastered, between being active and passive. In this way the everyday can be a limitation as well as an opening.

Daily reiterating events (routines and habits) form patterns of repetition that become naturally embedded in the everyday. These patterns give meaning and purpose to habitual behaviour and satisfy needs for familiarity, meaning and control. Each fresh repetition seems to strengthen the mastery that one is in search of by being an exact copy of something, which then becomes an "acquired" subject for ordering and mastery. Repetition involves pleasure in the form of mastery and control and fills in time but is itself also boring, because it is recycling what one already knows. Most often the longing for control overrides the unpleasant (and boring) nature of repetition and makes individuals engage in patterns of repetition during the course of their everyday. Furthermore, habits allow for continuity throughout any amount of change, and offer themselves as something concrete to which one can cement oneself. The everyday thereby becomes a system free of unknown (and potentially painful) consequences and therefore seemingly pleasant. Existing within a system of no consequence also places one in a state of limbo and makes repetition appear like pure decoration. If each day and situation presented itself as new in favour of the recognisable, a sense of non-coherent coincidence (chaos) would arise rather than that of order and would leave an individual with no sense of control.

Like the man on *Vexation Island*, one can exist in a mode limited by a circular pattern or loop (a system of no new consequences) which does not easily allow one to doubt that system or consider the possibility of another but, rather, presents itself as the natural course of life. Being in the midst of a circular pattern of an everyday without recognising one's position within it, signifies that one is mastered by it rather than in control of it. Engaging in the repetitive and circular course of the everyday becomes meaningless if it is with no other motivation than that of retaining the present course of life. A lack of will and awareness resembles a compulsion to repeat rather than a possibility of transcendence and meaning. One day becomes nothing but a waiting for the next, and so repetition has presented itself as the grounds for illness rather than cure.

The behaviour of the protagonist on *Vexation Island* bears resemblance to an illness in his desire to repeat even what (he knows) will cause him pain, [37]. The incentive of

repeating the unpleasant might be a longing to master it, but the man finds himself lost in it and determined by it, exactly because he re-lives it again and again. The wound on his forehead is a straightforward way of illustrating that he is hurting himself, and might even wish to do so. The fleshiness of the wound and the pain it obviously causes, make the stupidity and absurdity of his actions appear even greater.

Repetition is a pattern that holds its actor by offering a sense of mastery, which seems stronger for each repetition. The longing for control is the most satisfying but also the most limiting, because it prevents man from becoming conscious of its implications and thereby holds him fixed in his situation. Despite the fact that the man on *Vexation Island* is hurting himself, his obsession with mastering his situation does not allow him to stop.

To break a vexatious circle requires an act of will. It requires that one becomes aware of one's responsibility as the author of one's life and decides to live up to that responsibility. To recognise that one's life is what it is because one composed it that way, can lead to an awareness of one's freedom (and the possibility) of having done it differently. This freedom implies that beneath one there is nothing but utter groundlessness, there exists no one who can validate one's life design. To see this is to recognise an absence of certainty and face meaninglessness, anxiety and pain. So why search for meaning if it causes pain, if nothing lasts anyway and human beings (without the aid of a higher authority) solely construct the world for their own needs? Why search for meaning in life, if everything could as well have been otherwise? Then, what enduring meaning can there be in life?

Meaning provides a sense of mastery; feeling helpless and confused in the face of random, unpatterned events, human beings seek to order them and, in doing so, gain a sense of control over them. Meaning gives birth to values and, hence, to a code of behaviour. The decisions and behaviour in the everyday then become meaningful as a potential source for providing answers to *why* one exists, by offering answers to *how* one can exist. In this way, one can turn repetition into something productive. By changing the meaning and purpose of the reiterating pattern of the everyday, one can shake it up from the inside and make it work as a cure rather than an illness, and thereby take advantage of its capabilities. The vexatious circle then changes and becomes productive and meaningful rather than meaningless and pacifying. This can result in a mode of the everyday, which is not in bad faith or fallenness but corresponds with one's values, ethics and ideas of the world, and thereby results in a life that is unique, authentic and of certain value.

There is a paradox in the fact that the more deliberately one pursues meaning, the less likely one is to find it; the rational questions one can pose about meaning will always outlast the answers. In life, meaningfulness is a by-product of engagement and commitment – not that

engagement provides rational answers to questions of meaning, but it causes these questions not to matter so much.

Notes

- [1] J.W. Goethe, quoted in the essay *A Voyage To and From Rodney Graham's Isle of Vexation* by Robert Linsey in *Island Thought: an Archipelagic Journal Published at Irregular Intervals*, p.26.
- [2] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p.13.
- [3] Jean-Paul Sartre, in the essay *The Problem of Nothingness* in *Essays in Existentialism*, p. 78.
- [4] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p.19.
- [5] *Ibid.*, p.18.
- [6] *Ibid.*, p.19.
- [7] *Ibid.*, p.17.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p.21.
- [9] *Ibid.*, p.5.
- [10] Robert C. Solomon, in the chapter *Jean-Paul Sartre* in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, p.710-711.
- [11] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, p.88.
- [12] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, p.124.
- [13] *Ibid.*, p.36.
- [14] *Ibid.*, p.204.
- [15] One could argue whether the quest for meaning then becomes the meaning of existence itself, but that would invalidate the argument at hand.
- [16] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.117.
- [17] R.J. Hollingdale, *Introduction to Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.26.
- [18] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.42.
- [19] *Ibid.*, p.139.
- [20] *Ibid.*, p.25.
- [21] Gilles Deleuze, in the chapter *The Powers of the False* in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, p.126.
- [22] *Ibid.*, p.131.
- [23] *Ibid.*, p.138.
- [24] *Ibid.*, p.141.
- [25] *Ibid.*, p.137.
- [26] Martin Heidegger, in the chapter *Lecture II* in *What Is Called Thinking?*, p.126.
- [27] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.137.
- [28] *Ibid.*, p.136.
- [29] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.220.
- [30] *Ibid.*, p.222.
- [31] Charles B. Guignon in the chapter *Martin Heidegger* in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, p.318-319.
- [32] Michael T. Taussig, in the chapter *A Report to the Academy* in *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, p.xiii.
- [33] Walter Benjamin, in the essay *On the Mimetic Faculty* in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings – Vol.2. 1927-1934*, p. 720.
- [34] Michael T. Taussig, in the chapter *Physiognomic Aspects of Visual Worlds* in *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, p.19.
- [35] Robert Linsey, in the essay *A Voyage To and From Rodney Graham's Isle of Vexation* in *Island Thought: an Archipelagic Journal Published at Irregular Intervals*, p. 29-30.
- [36] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p.19.
- [37] This could be discussed in relation to what Sigmund Freud described as the “pleasure principle” and the “death instinct”, but would complicate this discourse needlessly.

Illustrations

Rodney Graham, still from 35 mm film *Vexation Island*, 1997.

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