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PROCRASTINATION, ORDINARY AND PHILOSOPHICAL

Being confined is like being a fish in a bocal. Time is extended as in Yves Tanguy's painting *Day of slowness*. You cannot be drowned because you are already drowned. You don't need to breathe because you don't have lungs, but gills. But here at the bottom of water, your fate is enviable: no obligations, since *ought* implies *can*, and you can't do very much. And if there are any, you can postpone them at will, since no one can check that you received the orders. Now of course there is the internet, our watchdog. But it can't watch you all the time. So you have plenty of time for laziness and for procrastination, the vice of *acedia*, one of the seven deadly sins, which Dante describes in *Inferno* VII (115-26) and in *Purgatorio* XVII, and magnified in Goucharov's *Oblomov*. In particular, we procrastinate and postpone to the Greek calendars what we could do today.

Dante considers *acedia*, and sloth, one of its cousins, as the sin of not loving God. It was the permanent temptation of the monks. But for us moderns, *acedia* is not a sin anymore. Evelyn Waugh said that it is "one of the most amiable of weaknesses", because "most of the world's troubles seem to come from people who are too busy".¹ Waugh was thinking of his famous predecessors in praise of idleness.² *Acedia* is usually liberating because it takes you to a stroll in the woods, to the beach, and to smoking a pipe on the front of the house like a Norman Rockwell character. But it implies some elbow room, which is hard to get when you are a fish in a bocal. Still, liberation from the internet is even more a bliss: no more e-mails to answer, facebook friends to greet stupidly, no more websites to visit obsessively, no more tweets to attend. Is it sure, though? It seems clear that during confinement time, use of the internet is going to rocket, but we should resist, and should try to enjoy the vice.

Acedia has been associated since Renaissance times to melancholy, and to a kind of mental illness. Today we do not think in terms of virtue and vice, but in terms of rationality and irrationality. In *acedia*, and in particular its close cousin, procrastination, rationality is *prima facie* defeated, because the agent fails to do now what he judges best to do now, and postpones it, sometimes indefinitely. It looks like *akrasia*, or weakness of the will, but with a temporal element³. One of the conditions of akratic action, in addition be against one's best judgment, is that it is intentional and free (or at least the agent believes himself to be free). Procrastination is intentional, and involves a decision to do something the agent believes that he ought to do or thinks best to do *at a time*, but defers to another time. It is less clear that it is a free action, or that the agent thinks of himself as free. It's not that the agent does not want to do the action, and that he considers it to be a good thing to do, or something he ought to do, but that he does not want to do it now. This does not seem to be irrational in itself: what would

¹ Evelyn Waugh, 'Sloth', in *The Seven Deadly Sins* (London: Sunday Times Publications, 1962), pp. 56–64 (p. 56). quoted by J. Rushworth, *Mourning in Dante, Petrarch and Proust*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

² Samuel Johnson, *The idler*, Lasalle, *Le droit à la paresse*, Russell *In praise of idleness*

³ On weakness of will, see Davidson "How is Weakness of Will possible?" in his *Essays on actions and events*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, on procrastination, see Christine Tappolet, "Procrastination and Personal Identity", in Chrisoula Andreou and Mark D. White (dir.), *The Thief of Time. Philosophical Essays on Procrastination*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2010. 115-129.

be wrong or irrational to postpone doing something? One could have a good reason to do so, because some matters are more urgent. Actually, Oblomov keeps on saying to himself that there are more urgent things to do than to write a letter to one of his tenants. The contradiction comes with the time index: the agent considers that he ought to do it *now*, and does not do it *now*. If the agent changes his mind about the time when he wants to perform the action, this is not irrational. George Ainslie has identified the problem as a problem of *discounting in time*: the more the thing to do is close, the more one is tempted to procrastinate. One prefers to do A to doing B, but when A approaches, one prefers to do B.⁴ But this may not be irrational if this reversal of preferences is judged to be good by the agent. There are actually rational ways to deal with procrastination, which have been called by John Perry “structured procrastination”: you prefer to do A rather than B, but when A approaches, you do B, which is less important, and when B approaches you do C, which before you did not prefer to B. If you end up doing something, you may do less important things, but do something anyway. This is not irrational, as John Perry has famously argued.⁵ We are all familiar with reporting the writing of an essay by writing instead a review of a book, and then instead grading papers and then filling up boring administrative forms. In the end if we manage to do the last in the list, we end up being rational: we have just changed our preferences. Some have argued that procrastinating is a symptom of not caring for one’s future self. But who knows what one’s future self will be, and who knows what one present self is? So it is not clear that procrastinating is irrational. If there is rationality in procrastination, this behavior is neither wrong nor a sign of melancholy. It can be, if not the perfect, at least the best thing to do in the present times of confinement.

If procrastination is not obviously irrational, there is a form of procrastination which may well be irrational, and possibly vicious. It is what we may call *philosophical procrastination*. This is the practice, on the part of a philosopher writing an article or a book, of postponing indefinitely the statement of the thesis that he or she intends to propose. You start reading the paper, and ask yourself : What is the author aiming at ? When you reach the end of the paper, it has taken various twists and turns, but you still do not know what the author wanted to say. In other cases, a thesis is suggested at the beginning of the article, but when you reach the end, it has neither been made explicit nor argued. This is even more irritating in a book. Many philosophical works are like this, but those written by Jacques Derrida are masterpieces of philosophical procrastination. I do not have space here to give many examples, but one can take Derrida’s *The Truth in Painting* (1978) ⁶. The book is supposed to be about art, and starts with a commentary on Hegel’s aesthetics, but moves briskly to an examination of the notion of *parergon*, analysed by Kant in his *Third Critique*. Derrida asserts :” [the paragon is] neither work (*ergon*) nor outside the work [hors d’oeuvre], neither inside nor outside, neither above nor below, it disconcerts any opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it gives rise to the work. It is no longer merely around the work. “⁷ The suggestion is that this is both a

⁴ G.Ainslie, *Breakdown of will*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001

⁵ John Perry, *The Art of procrastination*, New York, Workman 2012

⁶ *La vérité en peinture*, Paris, Flammarion, 1978, tr. engl G. Bennington *The truth in painting*, University of Chicago Press 1987

⁷ Ibid, English edition. P. In the French a similar passage: « Un parergon vient contre, à côté et en plus de l’ergon, du travail fait, du fait, de l’œuvre mais il ne tombe pas à côté, il touche et coopère, depuis un certain

detail in Kant's analysis, and something essential. The idea seems to be that it's the same for philosophy, which ought to be about things essential, but turn out to rest on details and *parerga*. Why was I necessary to spend so much time on Kant's *Third Critique* to understand this idea? It is not said. Then the book moves to another chapter on Ponge, and then to the topic of the sublime. One sees vaguely that the topics are connected, and that Derrida intend to talk about the truth of a work of art, and indirectly about truth itself as understood by Heidegger. But in the end we do not know. We ask ourselves very often this question when reading Derrida: was he after something? If so what? if he was after something, why did not he proposed his thesis first, or if not first, at least in the end? Maybe he was doing *parergon* and the book was self-referential. We are left with guessing. Some readers have just concluded that the book is hard to read and boring, which is true.⁸ But a better hypothesis is that Derrida was procrastinating. He may have wanted to propose a thesis, but was too lazy to propose it straight away, as the analytic philosophers he was talking to at the time⁹. Was Derrida irrational ? Was he just lazy? I suggest that he may have used , willy-nilly, John Perry's method of structured procrastination: saying a few little obscure things about art , in order to avoid having to be clear on the topic. It cannot be an objection to a philosopher to say that he procrastinates in this way. Many other philosophers do so, such as Kierkegaard and often Rousseau, and indeed a lot of imitators of Derrida. Philosophy is not a novel, even less a detective novel, with a beginning and an end, and there are detective novels and film noirs, such as Raymond Chandler's, where you don't know where you end up. But no doubt a philosopher who sincerely aims at truth cannot afford to put it off all the time, which is nevertheless what a number of philosophical works do.

By the way, what did I want to show in this small piece? I'll say that later.

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dehors, au-dedans de l'opération. Ni simplement dehors ni simplement dedans. Comme un accessoire qu'on est obligé d'accueillir au bord, à bord. Il est d'abord l'à-bord. » (French edition , p. 63)

⁸ D. Carrier. "Review: The Truth of Painting by Jacques Derrida." *Journal of Philosophy*, 85. No 4 (April 1988), pp 219-223.

⁹ Over the famous debate with John Searle