

EXAMPLES OF NOT-FREE PEOPLE

Index to posts in this series.

In the last two posts I've described several responses to Existential Ambiguity set out in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics Of Ambiguity*. In this post, I give some examples, and offer a suggestion for using the Existentialist conception of freedom to argue with Trumpists.

Infantile people. There are few people forced into infantile behavior today. De Beauvoir gives some cringey examples from prior times, women denied any agency from birth, for example.

Sub-men. These are people who close themselves off from their freedom. They merely respond to whatever stimuli move them the most. De Beauvoir says these are the people recruited to do the dirty work of tyranny. Examples include Nazi thugs, the secret police, the torturers and their supervisors, and the people who operated the concentration camps and the gas chambers. An obvious parallel today is the ICE goons terrorizing people around the country.

Serious people. These are people who cling to the structures of belief and rules of behavior handed to them by others. They pretend these are immutable facts rather than human constructions. They surrender to others their power to make moral judgments. This, I think, is the largest group.

I think Adolf Eichmann is a good example, at least the Eichmann Hannah Arendt describes in *Eichmann In Jerusalem*. He obeys the rules he is handed by the regime, and strives within those structures to carry out his orders and advance his career.

In the same way, all the Good Germans who went along with the entire Nazi project, followed the rules, sacrificed themselves and their children to the war effort, ratted out their Jewish

neighbors, ignored the assaults on the Jews and others, didn't question their own participation in the evil.

We see examples of this everywhere today. Of course we don't know the precise motivation of Trump voters, but apparently few of them have changed their minds despite his abuses. They do not exercise moral judgment about his attacks on people he doesn't like, whether it's John Bolton, James Comey, or a bunch of guys looking for day labor jobs at the Home Depot.

Adventurers. In the last post I discussed Don Juan as an example of an adventurer. As another example, here's a character describes his father, a businessman, in *Trade Me*, a novel by the Supreme Court clerk turned novelist Courtney Milan:

There is no end to my father's ambition. Whatever it is he wants, he lays out a plan and grabs it, and once he has hold of it, the only thing he can think about is the thing that is next on the horizon. P. 209.

Passionate people. One possible example of this is the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. From what I know, there is nothing to suggest he had Nazi tendencies or was particularly anti-Semitic. He entered and then left a Jesuit Seminary, studied under one Jew and had an affair with Hannah Arendt, also a Jew. But when the Nazi regime took over, he accepted a position as Rector of a major German university and a few days later joined the Nazi party.

He explained himself in an interview published after his death. He called it a compromise to join the Nazi party to save the university, and said he saw an "awakening" in the rise of the Nazi party that would be good for Germany. There's more. I read this to say he thought his work was more important than the damage done by joining the Nazis.

My book club read *The Director: A Novel* by

Daniel Kehlmann. It's historical fiction about the German film director G. W. Pabst. The character Pabst is a solid example of a passionate person. He loses his subjectivity in his drive to direct films, doing horrid things to carry out his cinematic vision. His end is a living version of Mozart's punishment of Don Juan.

Critics. There aren't many examples of critics. Perhaps one is Jean-Paul Sartre, who seems to have been convinced that his version of Existentialism was a universal truth. I say this because when Albert Camus published his book *The Rebel*, Sartre dispatched one of his followers to write a scathing review, claiming that Camus was not a real Existentialist. The vitriol was one major reason for the split between the two.

I note that critics aren't the same as rabid religious leaders. They are simply serious people who take their tenets to crazed extremes, and seem thrilled to ally themselves with fascists. Thus, cult leaders and the New Apostolic Reformation leaders don't count.

Discussion

1. I think that de Beauvoir is right: people unwilling to live their freedom are easy prey for tyrants. Some are active supporters, because they think they can hammer people they despise. Some are passive, thinking they'll prosper under the tyrant's regime. Some aren't paying attention.

2. Ever since the shitter-in-chief got elected I've hoped that this kind of reading would help me find things I can do to fight fascism. My first hope was that in these older writings there would be hints of things people might have done that would have slowed the rise of fascism. Sadly no.

So my second hope was that I would find tactics that might fight fascism among Trump's less crazy supporters. I see a couple of things. Polanyi says that when change becomes too rapid, people resist it. Arendt says that the

intellectual elites abandoned society to the mob. De Beauvoir says that people who are not fully free are easy marks for tyranny. And always in the back of my mind, C.S Peirce tells us that people become very uncomfortable when they suddenly doubt an idea they've held, and this is the only thing that will make them think again.

I tried to imagine using these insights in a conversation with some people I knew pretty well in my Church Choir in Nashville. I think they were sincere Christians, and I'm guessing a lot of them voted for Trump.

I imagine myself talking about immigrants with one of them. I think I'd make two points. First, I'd point to rising costs of food, and blame it on Trump's sudden attacks on immigrants which has caused rapid changes in agriculture.

Then I'd point to the videos and reports of the vicious treatment of these hard-working people: violently kidnapped, held in appalling conditions, shipped to dangerous lands where they don't speak the language, and separated from their kids. I'd ask how they reconcile that with the command of Jesus that begins the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

Jesus tells a lawyer to love his neighbor as himself. The lawyer (of course) asks who is my neighbor. Then Jesus tells the famous story, and asks who is the neighbor of the stricken man. The lawyer correctly answers the foreigner who helps. I know they'd see the point immediately; I must have heard that sermon five times over the years I was a member of that church. I'm sure they'd have some excuse, but they'd know it was fraudulent, which I hope would lead to doubt.

I imagine a lot of people at other churches might respond saying their preachers say otherwise. There's my opening. Why did you let that preacher tell you what Jesus meant? Perhaps your preacher means well, but the most fundamental tenet of every Protestant group is

that the individual has the ability, the right, and the duty to understand the words of the Bible themselves. Why are you afraid to make your own moral judgment and offer your own moral justification?

I think this line of discussion brings out the points I've learned from all these books. Would they lead to change? No, at least not in the short run. But it's something I can do, and it might make a tiny difference before it's too late..