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Do You Crave a Life Without Choice?

The dodges most of us use to avoid serious, life-changing decisions. Decidophobia, the fear of decision, locks us up in an existence without autonomy. From a forthcoming book.

by Walter Kaufmann

TO THOSE WHOSE MINDS ARE NOT LIBERATED, wars, revolutions and radical movements will never bring freedom, but only an exchange of one kind of slavery for another. That is one of the most tragic lessons of our century.

Liberation of the mind is no panacea, but without it angry rhetoric and cruel bloodbaths are of no avail, and tyranny endures. Most radicals and revolutionaries still cling to decrepit ideas like justice and equality and depend on guilt and fear just as our fathers and mothers did. What we need is a new, autonomous morality.

Those who hoped that the death of God would spell freedom from guilt and fear were wrong. The breakdown of religion as the great authority in moral matters has not brought us autonomy, but only a variety of substitutes. The quest for these surrogates is rooted in a dread that hitherto has had no name. This dread is the fear of autonomy. I will name it decidophobia.

The Fear of Autonomy. Humanity craves but dreads autonomy. Autonomy consists of making with open eyes the decisions that give shape to one's life. But being afraid of making fateful decisions, one is tempted to hide autonomy in a metaphysical fog and to become side-tracked and bogged down in puzzles about free will and determinism. It is far easier to define autonomy out of existence than it is to achieve autonomy in the very meaningful sense in which it can be attained. The difference between making the decisions that govern our lives with our eyes open and somehow avoiding this is all important.

Freedom becomes tangible in the fateful decisions that mold our future and they are objects of extreme dread. Every such decision involves norms, standards, goals. Treating these as given, lessens this dread. The comparison and choice of goals and standards arouses the most intense decidophobia.

Other phobia words also mix New Latin with Old Greek: claustrophobia, for example. Moreover, the Latin *decido* has two very appropriate meanings. It can mean "decide," which is the primary meaning intended here. But it can also mean "fall off" (hence plants are called deciduous if their leaves fall off in winter), and decidophobia has something in common with acrophobia, the fear of precipitous heights. Although the two Latin verbs have different roots (*caedo* and *cado*), our expression "take the plunge" suggests the relevance of both meanings. Decidophobia is also the fear of falling.

People do not fear all decisions. Decidophobes, far from dreading meticulous distinctions, may actually revel in them. For immersion in microscopic decisions is one good way of avoiding fateful decisions.

The decidophobe has three basic options. He can avoid fateful decisions; he can stack the cards so that one alternative is clearly the right one; or he can decline responsibility. He need

not even choose between these options; they can be combined. In brief—avoid, if possible; if that does not work, stack; and in any case make sure that you do not stand alone.

I shall examine 10 strategies that help decidophobes avoid dizziness. All of them involve the refusal to scrutinize significant alternatives.

When anyone shuts his eyes in a crisis, it is plausible to assume that he is afraid. But if he merely acts as if he were afraid, he is still open to criticism. My critique of decidophobia applies also to those who are not afraid but merely behave as if they were.

Life Without Choice. The first strategy for avoiding decisions is *religion*. Religion says: Do this and don't do that! Or: Thou shalt, and thou shalt not. Instead of inviting us to evaluate alternative standards, it gives us norms and tells us how to apply them. Religions have also evolved traditions that shield us from situations in which tragic choices might become inevitable.

The most obvious illustration is monasticism, which requires one great decision—to renounce the freedom to make major decisions in the future. Those who become monks or nuns no longer need face such fateful decisions as how to live, what to do, and what to believe.

As a rule, a person does not even *decide* to submit to the authority of a religion. He is born into the fold and then confirmed at the threshold of adolescence before he has had any chance to explore alternatives and make a choice. He does not so much *decide* to stay as he does not decide to leave.

Allegiance to a religion is not always prompted by decidophobia. Nevertheless, it represents one of the most popular strategies for avoiding fateful decisions. In fact, it is nothing less than the classical strategy. On the whole it worked well, not only during the Middle Ages, but even quite recently in villages and small towns where almost everybody shared the same religion.

In this century, however, it has broken down more and more, since World War II, even among Roman Catholics. Clergymen of the same religion now adopt widely different public positions on crucial moral questions. Still, many people shut their eyes to this plain fact and continue to persuade themselves that their own moral views do not depend on any decision of their own but are simply part of being Jewish, Christian, or, say, Hindu. If this strategy were not dis-

integrating, there would be less need for so many others.

Drifting is another strategy, and even less deliberate. It comes in two forms. Type A is *status quoism*. It is extremely popular with those over the age of 30, but is not confined to them. Instead of choos-

Monasticism requires one great decision—to renounce the freedom to make major decisions in the future.

ing how to live, one simply drifts along in the status quo. All decisions are made and none need to be made. Some people require a regular supply of alcohol or tranquilizers to remain satisfied with Type A.

This form of inauthenticity is readily perceived by many students, and a few go to the opposite extreme: Type B. They drop out, are not guided by tradition, have no ties, no code, no major purpose. They live from moment to moment, and rarely know in advance what they will do next. If they hitchhike, they go wherever they are taken. They leave things to chance. Everything depends on whatever impulse happens to be felt at the moment. To be governed by caprice is to drift. Type-B substrategy also can be lubricated with alcohol, but since World War II this kind of drifting has been more often associated with other drugs.

When drifting breeds a sense of empti-

ness and despair, often a person becomes receptive to the siren song of commitment. Deeply dissatisfied with both Type A and Type B, he joins a movement—or just drifts into one in conformity with those around him. This is the third strategy—*allegiance to a movement*. (Most of the strategies that follow have a less total effect than the first two and work only in *some* areas of life.)

"Of necessity, the party man becomes a liar," said Nietzsche, "... wishing not to see something that one does see; wishing not to see something *as* one sees it." These themes are developed in Eric Hoffer's *True Believer* and Jean-Paul Sartre's "Portrait of the Antisemite." Sartre made common cause with the Communist party for years, although he never actually joined it. Others have joined parties or movements or retained their religion without any sacrifice of the intellect. They live in a tension, occasionally acute, between their loyalty and their intellectual conscience. As usual, there are innumerable possibilities and degrees.

Certainty Above Truth. At one extreme is the type sketched by Nietzsche and portrayed more elaborately by Sartre. Such a person has made a decision once and henceforth needs only to extrapolate from it. His views come nowhere near doing justice to the complexity of fact, but he makes a virtue of simplicity and despises subtlety and cleverness. He prizes certainty above the truth or considers it, untenably, a warrant of truth, and he takes intellectual scrupulousness for cowardice and a lack of manly decisiveness. He fails to recognize his own acrophobia, his own dread of standing alone without support.

The Movement As Mother. It is no accident—to use an expression dear to Marxists—that the Communist party thinks of itself as a mother, just as does the Catholic Church. Many radical movements also function as surrogate mothers. The "we-we" orientation that many radicals adopt in their thought and speech is infantile. All talk of community notwithstanding, it recognizes no singular "you." Only an "I" can say "you" to an individual. The "we-we" orientation is regressive. It takes us back to the "craving for community" which Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor associated with the desire to be united "in one unanimous and harmonious ant heap."

By 1972, "the movement" in the United States referred more often to women's fight for equality than to the New Left. Here the goals were much bet-

ter defined and mattered more to many women than did any sense of belonging. No woman could hope to exert enough pressure as an individual to end invidious forms of discrimination that made it far more difficult for women than for men to live autonomous lives. Hence there was a real need for concerted action, and no need whatever for any woman who approved of this "movement" to use it to avoid autonomy.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the attraction of movements for decidophobes. Those seeking liberation must ask themselves whether they are merely exchanging one kind of conformity for another. To renounce a religion, a creed, or a code, and throw off the blinders that go with it does not necessarily spell liberation. The question remains whether one has turned to a surrogate and put on a new pair of blinders.

The fourth strategy, *allegiance to a school of thought*, sounds like a mere variant of allegiance to a movement, but there is an important difference. Membership in a movement is generally palpable and overt, and a person's consciousness of it is usually crucial. It helps to give him an identity. Allegiance to a school of thought is typically quite unselfconscious and may even be denied outright.

Those who belong to a school of thought are usually more interested in small differences with their fellow members than in what they have in common. They tend to deal with a few clusters of problems, not with others, and they tend to deal with them in the same way. They share a way of thinking, a style, and a tradition that they see in much the same perspective. Rival schools of thought are not so much tolerated as they are ignored. Those who go it alone typically are shrugged off as crackpots until one of them succeeds in capturing the public imagination and is therefore perceived as a threat.

It may require exceptional insight and skill to spell out the shared assumptions of a school. Most of them do not function like dogmas; they do their job without rising to consciousness. They provide a largely unquestioned framework in which a person can make all sorts of small decisions and tangible contributions without ever coming face to face with shattering decisions.

Once basic assumptions are spelled out, they can be questioned. It is much safer to keep them buried. In Martin Heidegger's philosophical jargon, for ex-

ample, questions that might cast doubt on his whole edifice can hardly come up. Questions that are asked in a different language can be shrugged off as subphilosophical. They show the ignorance of the questioner and all is safe.

The same goes for analytical philoso-

The exegetical thinker reads his own ideas into a text and then gets them back endowed with authority.

phy and Marxism, psychoanalysis and behaviorism, phenomenology and other schools of thought. A person makes his basic decision, usually unaware that he is doing so, and the choices that remain for him are small enough to be enjoyable. Once he has chosen the game and the rules he can have a good time planning his moves. Microscopism spells safety.

The Text As a Prop. The fifth strategy I call *exegetical thinking*. This strategy assumes that a particular tradition or text is right beyond doubt. For the exegetical thinker, the text is as God. If what it seems to say is wrong, it is the interpreter that is wrong, never the text.

The exegetical thinker reads his own ideas into a text and then gets them back endowed with authority. He avoids standing by himself and saying what *he* thinks; for he might be wrong and would not know what to say if others followed his example and said what *they* thought.

Saying what one personally thinks would call for the evaluation of alternatives and invite the use of reason and the assessment of evidence. There would be no telling in advance where the argument might lead. Moreover, the result would be provisional, pending further evidence and argument. Confronted with the prospect of acrophobia, the exegetical thinker looks for a prop, for something to lean on. Being a man of words, he finds a text.

Heidegger follows this strategy in his exegeses of the pre-Socratic philosophers. Sartre also exemplifies this pattern. By 1946, he felt dissatisfied with the extreme subjectivism of his early existentialism, and in his famous lecture on "Existentialism is a Humanism," he cast about for some objective standards to meet the charge of irresponsibility. The discussion after his lecture convinced him that he had not succeeded, and he eventually turned to Marxism.

But Sartre's Marxism is rather like Kierkegaard's Christianity: a highly subjective version that is unacceptable both to careful scholars and to fellow Christians or Marxists. It is a way of endowing Sartre's own views with authority. It is ironical that these existentialists who give such pride of place to decision should succumb again and again to decidophobia.

Exegetical thinking is also exemplified by the liberal who believes in inalienable rights to life and liberty, in the equality of all men, or in other similar articles of faith. He feels bound to interpret these old formulas in such a way that they will turn out to be true. To his mind, an appealing exegesis has a much stronger claim to assent than any impartial inquiry would suggest.

The first five strategies aim at making no fateful decisions at all, or at most the one decision to make no more fateful decisions from now on. Four of the five involve some recourse to authority; drifting does not. The next two strategies are basically different.

No Shades of Gray. *Manichaeism* is the sixth strategy. The term comes from an early variant of Christianity that held the world to be a great battleground of the forces of good and evil.

The Manichaeist insists on the need for a decision, but the choice is loaded and practically makes itself. It is like being asked to choose between two dishes of food and being told that this one is poisoned and will make you sick, while that one tastes incomparably better and

will improve your health and expand your consciousness. All good is on one side, all evil on the other.

The Manichaeans ignore or deny inconvenient facts; falsification of history is his indispensable crutch. He discredits uncomfortable arguments as coming from the forces of evil, and has no need for quandaries that might keep him sleepless.

It is easier to ridicule this strategy than it is to resist it. Indeed, it has been so popular in so many different periods and contexts that one may wonder whether man is not doomed to think in black and white. But he is not. The ancient Greeks, for example, resisted this temptation to a remarkable degree.

Conflict is at the heart of Homer's *Iliad* and of Greek tragedy, but Homer and the tragic poets found humanity on both sides of the contests they described. When the gods participated, some took this side and some that, and like the heroes they were neither wholly good nor altogether evil. In Aeschylus' "Libation Bearers," Orestes actually says, "Right clashes with right." Hegel's notion that it is the essence of tragedy to represent collisions in which both sides are justified was based squarely on Greek tragedy; but he overshot the mark when he claimed occasionally that both sides are equally justified. As a rule, wrong clashes with greater wrong, not only in Greek tragedy but also in life and in history.

Neoromantics who extol direct experience and feeling are much more prone to catch the virus of Mani than are scientists, engineers, and analytical philosophers who generally realize that analysis is indispensable. Thoughtful people are at least dimly aware of the claims of both feeling and understanding. Even those who incline heavily toward one side usually feel some need for the other. Thus the analytically minded tend to leave the realms of faith and morals, if not politics, to feeling and intuition, while the romantics indulge in a bare minimum of analysis and tend to favor polarities.

Reason: Neither God Nor Satan. The seventh strategy is the subtlest of the lot. I shall call it *moral rationalism*. This strategy claims that purely rational procedures can show what a person ought to do or what would constitute a just society. The moral rationalist has no need to choose between different ideals, different societies and different goals.

A person has no room left for tragic quandaries or for fateful choices.

My repudiation of moral rationalism does not entail an acceptance of what I call moral irrationalism. To suppose that it must would be to commit the Manichaeans fallacy. I repudiate both.

Moral irrationalism claims that because reason by itself cannot show us

Even if the future had belonged to Hitler, an autonomous person might well have chosen to go down fighting against the Nazis.

what to do, it is irrelevant when we are confronted with fateful decisions. This view is exemplified in different ways by Kierkegaard and Heidegger, and is widely associated with existentialism. The moral irrationalist implies that while it may be reasonable to keep your eyes open when you make relatively petty decisions, it makes no sense to keep them open and examine your impulsive preferences and significant alternatives when a choice is likely to mold your future. In other words, be careful when you drive slowly, but when you go over 50 miles an hour, shut your eyes!

Pedantry is the eighth strategy. It plays a central part in the creeping microscopicism mentioned earlier. As long as a person remains absorbed in microscopic distinctions, he is in no great danger of coming face to face with fateful decisions.

To be sure, careful attention to detail is not only compatible with autonomy but a requirement of intellectual integrity. Pedantry becomes decidophobic at

the point where a person never gets around to considering major decisions with any care or actually closes his eyes to macroscopic alternatives.

Pedantry is often part of a mixed strategy, and may appear as an ingredient of some of the others. But it also can be a person's one and only strategy. If so, he is not likely to become famous; hence no great examples come to mind. But Grand, a character in Albert Camus' novel, *The Plague*, may serve as an illustration.

Grand has, he says, his work, which consists of writing a book, but the first sentence is giving him no end of trouble, and he keeps rewriting it, working for weeks on a single word.

Tomorrow Can Be Wrong. The ninth strategy is the *faith that one is riding the wave of the future*. This, too, is usually part of a mixed strategy and is frequently associated with a religion or movement. Sartre, for example, endowed Marxism with authority because it is "the philosophy of our time." This exempts him from any need to see what speaks against it and what speaks for various alternatives to it.

In fact, the wave of the future would possess no moral authority even if we could predict it. Anne Morrow Lindbergh, who first said, in 1940, "The wave of the future is coming and there is no fighting it," meant the triumph of Hitler. Even if the future had belonged to him, an autonomous person might well have chosen to go down fighting against the Nazis.

Those who employ this strategy never stand alone or unsupported, they always feel backed up by *force majeure*. The Soviet Writers' Secretariat, which considered Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward* unpublishable as written, was generous with offers to help him rewrite it. One of the major provocations of the book was the concluding image of the novel: "An evil man threw tobacco in the Macaque Rhesus eyes. Just like that . . ." The affront was not so much that Stalin was likened to an evil man, but that the author implicitly denied the Marxist philosophy of history and insisted on the element of caprice in human affairs.

A person does not have to be a member of the Soviet Writers' Secretariat to be dizzied by the thought that what some individual decides "just like that" might determine the misery and death of millions. To avoid this dizziness, people have always found it tempting to believe in a divine government, the stars,

oracles, the *I Ching* or "history." Autonomy precludes any deference to the wave of the future.

Committee of Two. The 10th strategy, like the first two, often spells total relief. It is *marriage*. At first glance, it looks quite different from the others and therefore out of place. But it is probably the most popular strategy of all. Legions of women have echoed Ruth's beautiful words: "Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God." By marrying, they agree to make no more fateful decisions; they leave that to their husbands.

This pattern is deeply ingrained in many cultures. It is what a woman is expected to do when she gets married, and she is expected to get married. In reality, the strategy does not always work that way. The man who boasts that he makes all the big decisions may admit, when asked to explain, that big decisions concern what to do about China and small decisions deal with choosing where to live and buying a house. Figuratively speaking, many men marry their mothers.

Often a couple becomes a committee of two and makes decisions the way committees usually do. Instead of really deciding they both just talk until something "transpires." They presume a consensus and never question it if all goes well. But if things turn out badly, neither person feels altogether responsible. Each merely went along.

It does, of course, require a fateful decision to get married in the first place. But that decision itself may be prompted by decidophobia, by a desire to escape loneliness, by an unwillingness to make decisions in solitude. There is nothing paradoxical in that. Kierkegaard's famous leap into commitment is quite typically the plunge from a solitary height that many persons take to rid themselves of freedom.

It would require a fateful decision to go to a surgeon and say, "Please, doctor, give me a frontal lobotomy!" But it would not be in the least paradoxical to say that anyone who made that choice was a decidophobe who had come to the conclusion that he could not take it any more.

Marriage does not have to be decidophobic. It can be an expansion of consciousness. It can involve the will to incur additional responsibilities and to see a myriad of things in two perspectives. Climbing with another may be prompted by a will to reach peaks that a person cannot reach alone.

The same is often true of other strate-

gies. A religion or a movement may be embraced because it holds out the same promise. But we easily deceive ourselves and credit ourselves with a courage we lack. Often we would do well to realize that we are hedging our bet, however bold our intentions.

My final example exhibits the most awesome courage: Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Rarely has it been so difficult for any man to stand alone, utterly alone.

Losing Combinations. Some of these 10 strategies can be combined, and it pays to ask oneself how many points one gets. Some of the Catholic priests who joined the Fascist party in Italy, the Nazi party in Germany, or one of their cognates in Hungary or Slovakia earned eight out of a possible 10 points: they missed out only on drifting and marriage. Herbert Marcuse would get quite a few points, too. His fusion of Manichaeism and moral rationalism in his widely read essay on "Repressive Tolerance" is especially instructive because it is such a gross example of both.

His Manichaeism finds expression in his central plea for "intolerance against movements from the right, and toleration of movements from the left." His whole case depends on the assumption that there are two camps, the left and the right, the children of light and the children of darkness, and that the former are for peace and humanity and are "intelligent" and "informed," while the

latter are for aggression and hate, "stupid" and "misinformed."

His plea for "the withdrawal of toleration of speech and assembly from groups and movements which promote aggressive policies, armament, chauvinism, discrimination on the grounds of race and religion, or which oppose the extension of public services, social security, medical care, etc." hinges on the notion that all good, all humanity, intelligence, and information are on one side.

His moral rationalism finds expression when he says that "the distinction between liberating and repressive, human and inhuman teachings and practices is not a matter of value preference but of rational criteria."

Autonomous Lives. An autonomous person avoids all 10 strategies. He does not treat his own conclusions and decisions as authoritative, but chooses with his eyes open and then keeps them open. He has the courage to admit that he may be wrong, even about matters of the greatest importance. He objects to the 10 strategies not on account of their putative psychological origins, but because they preclude uninhibited self-criticism.

There are some well-known people who have resisted all 10 strategies and lived autonomous lives. The most outstanding examples from the long history of Western philosophy are Socrates and Nietzsche. Among the poets there are few whose lives are as well documented as Goethe's and no one can claim that he succumbed to any of the 10 strategies.

In our own time, Eleanor Roosevelt was an autonomous woman, but she did not fully come into her own until after her husband's death. She did not allow her difficult marriage to one of the world's strongest personalities to destroy her own will and spirit, and she never simply accepted his political or moral views. She kept her own counsel, and after his death she used every resource at her command for the benefit of those who needed help. She showed all the world what it means to be autonomous.

My final example exhibits the most awesome courage: Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Rarely has it been so difficult for any man to stand alone, utterly alone, without any prop of any kind. *The First Circle*, *Cancer Ward*, *Solzhenitsyn: A Documentary Record*, and *August 1914* show how he succeeded in resisting all 10 temptations, making one fateful decision after another against seemingly insuperable odds. His life is autonomy in action. □