

The State of Sloth

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There is a small arrow in my calendar. It carries an engagement from Wednesday to Thursday, and another carries it from Thursday to the following week. The arrows are drawn with considerable care. They make the movement appear orderly; one might almost suppose that something had been accomplished. My neighbor had asked me to help carry a cupboard upstairs. He has no calendar in which my arrow obliges the cupboard to move.

I was willing to help. Indeed, I have been willing for several days, and the persistence of this willingness has begun to reassure me concerning my character. A reluctant man might have refused at once. I have retained the task among my intentions, bestowed thought upon it, and repeatedly found a more suitable occasion. It occupies a respectable place in my life. It also occupies the passage outside his kitchen.

We commonly picture sloth as a man asleep while others work. The picture is convenient for the wakeful. I know a man who rises early, fills his hours, complains of their scarcity, and manages to arrive each evening with the essential thing untouched. His movements are numerous; their direction is another matter. He has learned to make activity protect him from an act. I should find him easier to describe if he did not keep my hours.

Yet fatigue must not be summoned as a witness against itself. The exhausted person needs rest, and there are burdens beneath which even rising from a chair becomes an undertaking. A person can be faithful while accomplishing little, and another can accomplish much without ever consenting to the responsibility he evades. To rebuke the first merely because he is still would be a particularly energetic injustice. Before naming an omission, one must ask what was possible, what was owed, and what the delay was doing.

In my own case the examination is less obscure. I had strength enough to rearrange my books that afternoon. I had promised my neighbor a quarter of an hour. What displeased me was that his quarter of an hour had become something he could ask for, without waiting until it agreed with my inward condition. I wanted to help as a generous possibility belonging to me. His expectation threatened to turn it into an ordinary promise belonging to us both.

Perhaps sloth begins to acquire its proper shape here: in a habit of keeping the claim suspended, although one knows it and has some power to answer it. The suspension preserves an agreeable freedom. I remain the person who can do the thing; I need not yet become the person who has done it, poorly perhaps, with interruptions, in a room where someone else determines where the cupboard shall stand. Possibility requires so little accommodation. There is ample room in it for every version of myself.

An actual deed is less spacious. It happens at an hour; it employs these hands; it leaves something that another person can encounter. Even its completion is troublesome. The anticipated kindness can still become magnificent. The kindness performed has become this small kindness, and the recipient may thank me briefly before going about his business. There is an indignity in being useful and then unnecessary. I had hoped that my goodness would provide me with a more lasting occupation.

The objection is ready: surely reflection protects us from foolish haste. Certainly. Some decisions ought to wait; some demands ought to be refused; a promise beyond one's strength requires an honest correction. But reflection must concern the question that remains unsettled. I knew the weight of the cupboard, the width of the staircase, and the hour at which my neighbor would be home. I spent the afternoon considering the difficulty of living responsibly. It was a considerable inquiry. The measurements did not change.

There is also the man who postpones his life until he has discovered its vocation. No task will be worthy of him until the whole has been revealed. He might begin with a modest occupation,

but that would endanger the great undertaking for which he is preparing. He therefore keeps himself available. Years pass, and his availability becomes almost his profession. I cannot say that every uncertain person belongs to this company. But I recognize its hospitality: it grants me a solemn reason to be absent from whatever is presently asking for me.

The future is admirably suited to such arrangements. It permits a beginning without requiring that one begin. Tomorrow I shall possess the right disposition, and tomorrow's disposition will make the act seem to follow naturally. When tomorrow arrives, however, it has acquired the plain inconveniences of today. The imagined willingness must become a movement of the body. I can restore tomorrow to its former purity only by placing it another day away. The distance is small enough to appear reasonable, and can be renewed for a lifetime.

The promise also has an objectionable continuity. It allows yesterday's decision to make a claim upon today's mood, as though I were one person through the whole of the week. I should like to review the arrangement each morning without disturbing the confidence my neighbor placed in it. Yet I accept this continuity readily when someone owes me a favor. I have never invited my debtor to consult his inward condition before remembering what he owes me. I expect him to be the same person on the day of repayment.

Meanwhile the world has not consented to wait. Another person carries what I have left standing, or postpones something of his own to make room for it. Sloth has this discreet way of distributing its labor. The man who says that he has done nothing may be describing only the visible part of the transaction. He has allowed the cost of his exemption to become another person's afternoon. I had thought my hesitation a private matter. The passage outside the kitchen belongs to a household.

Do I then propose perpetual labor? The proposal would suit my evasions very well. I could undertake it with enthusiasm, fail beneath its impossible demands, and obtain a grander explanation for neglecting the cupboard. Rest has its own seriousness. To sit quietly with

another person, to receive a pleasure without arranging its improvement, to sleep when one is tired: these can require consent to the life one actually has. Sloth may refuse enjoyment as readily as duty. It keeps the holiday waiting for the perfect weather, the conversation waiting for the perfect companion, and the present waiting for a person better prepared to inhabit it.

Its cure, if I may use a word whose confidence exceeds my experience, cannot consist merely in increasing the number of my occupations. I can multiply those indefinitely. Nor can it consist in despising myself; contempt provides enough inward business to occupy another week. What is required seems embarrassingly definite. In the present case, I knew what I could do and had promised to do it. I could have gone downstairs as the man I was, without first establishing that I would be faithful tomorrow. My consent had become a possession too precious to spend. The act may leave me less interesting to myself. The neighbor will have more room.

He knocked this evening to say that his brother had helped him. There was no accusation in his voice. That made the news harder to employ. Had he reproached me, I could have devoted the night to examining his impatience. Instead he thanked me for having been willing. I heard myself reply that I would gladly help another time.

I have erased the engagement. The calendar is orderly again. On the next page, beside a task whose circumstances I understand well enough, I have written: when I am ready.