

Letter from my uncle

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On freedom



I have an elderly uncle who still writes letters to me on paper with an envelope. He lives quietly in contemplatively but remains well informed about the world. He agreed that I could share part of a recent letter he sent me. While I don't agree with everything he says, his views on the present and the past are worth reading. Even if he may have overstated his case, he surely has a point.

This is part of his letter....

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...I can't help thinking that the present world is separated from the one of my youth by a greater gulf than that which normally separates generations. I can't know for sure, and history suggests I am probably wrong, because every generation tends to think like this. The flow of progress is constant, and one generation inevitably overtakes another. After a time neither can understand the other. And yet I cannot help but feel that everything has changed more rapidly in the last few decades, as if history had accelerated more than in the past.

I want to explain this thought in a little more detail, and tell you how I see this unpleasant revolution of the Zeitgeist. I want to write it down for myself as much as for you.

In a nutshell, I see several strange paradoxes.

There has been a great decline in people's freedom and this change has made them much less happy. It has made them prisoners in their own minds, and prey to the whims of big companies and the state. I worry that people are being reprogrammed inside their heads without them being aware of it.

I don't want to sing any praises for the old days. I know that in every age there is a small proportion of good and useful achievements, that there is one thinker for every thousand talkers, one true believer for every thousand who are soulless, one person who appreciates beauty for every philistine. Perhaps life was not better in the past. But on the whole it seems to me that until a few decades ago people had more light-heartedness and joy in their lives.

People seem to be so pressured today, so driven by the opinions of those they don't know, and may not even like if they ever met them. How is it that so many lives can be directed by strangers? They shout about their personal freedom and yet their online accounts know their every thought. How is it that their lives are spent feeding the profits of a few big companies and they do not see that? It is the first of my paradoxes. So many people appear to act out of self-love and yet, in reality, almost everything they do is for the gain of others. They have very little freedom of their own, though they fervently believe they do. Their lives are shouted out for others to witness, and yet few of the people they shout at really care. These other people only care about what others think too. Is it surprising that almost no one seems happy?

Those old questions about the roots of our existence seem to have been entirely forgotten or made into entertainment, something for every breeze of fashion. There is no longer any silence, no ability to wait, no distinction between big and small.

All around, people talk endlessly about trivialities, about personalities. There is constant noise, and yet any awareness of life, and what it means, can only come in silence. Knowledge and learning has been commoditised and stored on machines for instant access. This is paradox two. All this knowledge is freely available and yet it is delivered in a way that seems intended to block reflection and understanding. The information is also heavily manipulated and controlled, censored by a few big companies in America. In the day-to-day it is not insight and facts that are fed to people but opinions, dressed as facts, which together form a simplified worldview that is a very poor reflection of reality. With the use of AI it has become even harder to know what is true.

It seems to me that all this is deliberate: the endless flow of small thoughts, the spread of a pre-determined and highly defined reality, and the blurring of truth, is done with a purpose. It is done to take freedom away from people, to stop them considering the world around them, to stop them trying to understand it themselves. This makes people easier to control. It is easier to make them worry, which makes them cautious, to make them vote in certain ways, to make them hate and build them into a froth, and profit from them. It is a huge piece of trickery, like using mirrors to show a fake perspective that appears real.

This control of the narrative extends to the right of people to control their destiny. Here we are in the 21st century and people still have no right to choose the date of their own death, surely the most fundamental of freedoms. This is an issue I think about frequently, as you know.

It also appears as if everything that is done by people must bear fruit almost immediately. Everything has become a competition, even the baking of a scone. The speed of perceived achievement has become much more important than the fruits of success, just as the sense of winning has eradicated the pleasure of working together, of cooperation. It is like trying to accelerate the growth of a plant before understanding what makes it grow, or why.

Everywhere, people are burrowing around the roots, experimenting and exploiting what they see in the hope of instant reward, and that makes me suspicious. Nothing is left for those who want to think. Nothing is left to remain silent about. Everything is discussed, laid bare, illuminated with that distinct and approved light, with every study published hungry to be accepted as knowledge. The brightest people, those PhD students, are stuck burrowing into the most pointless minutiae while the world's most serious problems are largely ignored. It is either that or the brightest have been drugged into financial compliance by soulless rewards. Again, this all seems as if by design to me. It removes choice, eradicates considered views that do not fall into the specified prescription, simplifies what should not be simplified, removes that skill of considering the long term, and the purpose of life. It eradicates the pleasure that comes from seeing the beauty of the world. It all takes us further away from ourselves.

I am sure it was not like that before. I am sure I am not misremembering.

More than a decade ago there was a campaign in Spain for the right to be forgotten, and that young Austrian, Max Schrems, launched a case against Facebook. Around the same time Edward Snowden was forced into exile. Do you remember? These people wanted to protect long-won fundamental rights, *real* pillars of freedom. Without the right to forget or live anonymously people cannot be free. They can be manipulated, unable to move on, always haunted by their past. If they are watched and tracked, they feel constrained if they ever want to say what they really think, worried about where their views will be logged, on what website their names will appear. They are unable to live their lives as previous generations, because they are not given the freedom to think what they wish.

What has happened since these cases were in the news? It has become even worse. Almost everything is monitored and watched, even doorbells, refrigerators and wrist watches now listen. Cameras and microphones are installed everywhere, on phones and computers, and switched on by programmes you don't even know are there. Phones know everywhere you go and, if you forget your phone, your car tracks you instead, or those cameras installed on every lamppost. Every computer keystroke is logged. And all of this data is stored in Nevada and other places. Every search on Google is saved for eternity, every post and 'like' on Facebook is used to profile you. Yet people just shrug, and say that they have nothing to hide. Try telling that to those whose details were recorded in the Netherlands before the Second World War and they ended up in concentration camps. With so much surveillance it's like living with a family member or a stranger always standing at your shoulder, imagine your mother or a neighbour, always watching what you do, listening to what you say, guessing what you are thinking, knowing your future plans and recording the details of your most intimate passions and experiences.

How can this be called freedom?

With cash now disappearing, everything people buy is tracked too, from a bottle of gin to some condoms. I heard recently that a UK bank had sent messages to its customers telling them off for their bad diets because the apps knew what they bought at the supermarket. A bank telling you how to live your life! And all this is tracked and recorded and stored forever too.

Who is doing all this tracking? You know, of course. We've talked about this often. It's the state, and not just your own nation's state but the US government as well: it collects all it needs through private businesses. Were these half dozen companies Chinese or Russian there would be an outcry.

They have risen to have such dominant control in just a few decades, risen from the ground like feathered Mercury, and now they have such power over everyone's lives. Because they are American, it seems, almost no one sees there is a problem. The country responsible for more civilian deaths, more wars, more regime-changes and more snooping than any other in the last 50 years, the country that refuses to comply with important international conventions, which wants to give an amnesty to soldiers accused of war crimes, and which hounds those who expose its tracking, is viewed as trustworthy by almost everyone for some reason. No one says anything. Are they all blind? This is my third paradox: everyone says mass surveillance and a police state are bad, and point to China as a heinous example, and yet they are living in the precisely the conditions they claim to oppose.

All this leads to a great gulf between the inside and the outside, dividing people from the real world. A consequence is a loss of imagination for many people which deepens the loss of contentment and humour, and destroys the art of living. Who even talks about *that* today?

Freedom of the mind, which is what real freedom is, can only flourish on the foundations of an inner understanding of our relationship to the world around us. The lives of so many people are made worse not just by the constant noise but by the pressure for change. People are not allowed to integrate, to feel at one with the world. Everything is always being thrown away and renewed. This hankering for change makes people poorer, it damages their souls by encouraging a dislike of stability, whether that be one's view of the world, or the love of small everyday objects around us, and nature. No one has time for beauty, and so they remain distant from what matters, from what brings deeper contentment.

In the same way, so many people seem unable to hold onto any belief or inner conviction except at the most superficial level. Everything is black and white.

You and I have talked of this many times, and I apologise for repeating myself. But one glance at any newspaper is enough to see that an agenda is being laid out, like poisoned bird seed for everyone to peck. It is not nourishment that's offered, just intellectual fat, salt and sugar, with mind-warping additives, but it is hungrily consumed nonetheless. The narrative is simple. Growth is good, Russia is bad, China is bad, North Korea is bad, Hungary is not democratic, you should worry about the future and about the climate. Don't question the medicines they prescribe, or the political system. Choose the centrist parties, the ones who support business. Don't question democracy, or suggest it might not work. Fret about a world war, and remember that conflict is necessary. Never forget that you are on the right side. There's a new iPhone coming out. Put up Christmas decorations in October. There's a funny new video on TikTok.

It's almost impossible for people to cope with the material challenges we all face, when every second is filled with ideas that sting like nettles. Paradox four: within the cacophony there is a lure that everything should be easy, and that no effort is ever required. The hook is fed that it is easy to know without any need to learn. This creates unhappiness too because it is simply not true. It creates a false ambition in people, a belief that they can know and understand without effort, which can only frustrate them.

Of course, none of this will bring about the end of the world, though it surely stupefies people to the risks. It anaesthetises them.

It is this loss of proper understanding, this distance from knowledge, that will be the hardest to repair. Knowledge and effort valued in the past are seen as trivial and silly. They have been replaced by ludicrous aspirations, leading to an ever-thirsty and gnawing discontent with life, a living out of balance.

Not many years ago, families were more anchored to little things and little pleasures, rooted in their own stability. The outside world exerted a powerful draw but it was balanced by a sense of belonging, and that wonderful feeling of home. This created space for thought and the happiness of being together with those who share bonds, with goodwill for communication and conversation.

Of course every family still has its own tone, its secrets, its own language and form of teasing, and that will always be the case. But beyond, outside, the world now lacks colour and cheerfulness. This lack of contentment cannot be replaced by the latest iPhone, a new car or a 30-second video, and yet people have come to think it can...

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As I said, I don't share all his views. But his comments are surely worthy of reflection.

With thanks to Hermann Hesse, and his short story "The Old Days" written in 1907.