January 23, 2022

Dear Jake:  
  
If you still hold even some semblance of your past self, then there are few things you despise more than defunct conventions being pushed around solely by virtue of their being ancient. I won’t bother with that. I would ask you how you are doing but you already know I don’t care, and every glass of cheap liquor I consume today makes my indifference towards you all the clearer. The truth is, I am scared of facing the future. I am scared because, by all indications, you are the version of myself that I would rather die than see myself becoming. I just hope you’re not too far gone that the contents of this letter evoke not regret but anger… that you would feel the need to justify your way of living in your own eyes, that you would need fiction to appease the “Other” internalized in you (are you still sick of Lacan?). You haven’t fallen for the trap of commodified self-love, have you? We’ve always been our own harshest critic, and for good reason. A committed and total disregard for our own opinions of ourselves has enabled us to accept ourselves as who we are, independent of metanarratives passing normative judgements on our actions. At the very least, I expect you to possess this agency, and if at times I come across as harsh, it is in the spirit of encouraging that agency.

I am writing this letter at age 21, in my third year of university. University has changed you. Not greatly, but it has. When you first entered university, you might recall how little ambition you possessed. You had spent the preceding three years in a relaxed albeit constrained environment where the only activities available to you were reading and inflating big concepts in your not all that bright mind. On the first day of your first class with Professor Matsuoka, you declared to the class that your dream was to live the rest of your days managing a library in an idyllic corner of Russia (Professor Matsuoka thought you stole that from Murakami Haruki; you, of course, had in mind the retirement of Nietzsche). The class laughed it off, but you were 100% serious. There wasn’t a shred of doubt in your mind; you knew what made you happy, and that is what you wanted for yourself.

Except, you were never quite good at making what you want for yourself a reality. Before university, in your senior year of high school, you had a huge fight with you mother beginning when you mentioned to her that you had no intention of going to university. Naively (which is not meant to be a pejorative, it is your best trait), Illich had turned you off from the idea of institutionalized higher education. Your mother, understandably, did not share that same perspective, and this disagreement turned into a weeks-long feud between you two. And after all the bombast of your pseudo-revolutionary vision, you caved. You accepted your mother’s ultimatum, busied yourself with your studies for *juken*, and the following year you found yourself on the campus of Waseda, THIS TIME ready to exercise your freedom. For this time, you truly were free, weren’t you?

But no, you weren’t free. At Waseda, you met fellow students and professors who were unlike any of the people in your past communities. These people were overachievers by all metrics with high material ambitions that they tirelessly worked towards. The fast-paced environment soon became a source of agitation, and that agitation left you feeling that you also needed high ambitions to validate your life. It’s not surprising that your mother agreed with this notion and pushed you to excel in this new environment. Before long, you were vying with these same friends for a spot in the famed Global Leadership Fellow’s Program, and lo and behold… you won.

What these episodes highlight is your cowardice. You cling to high ideals and big ideas, but you’re never able to translate them into practice. When your mom ordered you to go to university, and when you found yourself embroiled in the rat race for GLFP, you were relieved. You rely on the comfort of societally endorsed “goals” and “ambitions”. When you are working towards them, you can conveniently forget about the existential questions that otherwise plague your mind. The inequalities and injustices that you are so sensitive to can be drowned out by the deafening sound of your “success”. If everyone else thinks you’re doing something right, then you must be, right?

And this is where I base my assumption that you, at age 30, have still not deviated from this pattern of sycophancy. I fear that you may still be bound by what is societally correct and living in reactionary passiveness. And while this cowardice hitherto has not caused me to stand in direct opposition to my morals, once in the productive apparatus, I will not be so safe. Are you a leader in a society you so despise? Have you sucked up to the establishment responsible for the misery and unjust treatment of so many? Have you lost your naivety?

Questions abound, but I do want to qualify this criticism by saying that it is not like I do not understand your moral dilemma, and this takes me back to my discussion of how university changed us. At university, we resolved to challenge ourselves by learning what we lacked: objectivity. More precisely, we devoted ourselves to the study of logic and positivism. Logic (math, economic theory) so that we can better organize our ideas in a lucid and accessible manner (and live a life consistent with a handful of arbitrarily established axiomatic values). Positivism (statistics, econometrics) so that we can better understand the facts of the world before indulging in self-righteous philosophies. Our fixation with establishing truths through methods that allow for objective verification naturally led to an operationalist shift in our mindset. To adopt the operational point of view is to only employ concepts of which we can appropriately define in terms of operations, of measurements. What that means for me, and likely means for you, is that merely living content with my philosophies now comes with guilt on my conscience. My actions are defined by their measurable effects, and not their intent or metaphysical implications. If I want to live consistent with my values, I must do so in a way that makes a substantive impact. The parable of the widow’s offering no longer appeals to me.

This brings us to the dilemma. Do I live freely, as an agent of my own will, disconnected from the societal ills that bother me so? Or do I use my privileged background to play into the system, so that I can increase my influence to make measurable changes for those affected by the system’s injustices. The former will make me happy; the latter will make me comfortable. Morally, I feel my privileges and capabilities obligate me to the latter.

I have not yet resolved this dilemma, and you may not have yet either. Perhaps there is a way to marry the two, so that you can pursue happiness while clearing your consciousness by fulfilling your responsibility towards those in more vulnerable positions than you. Whatever you are doing, I pray that you are not falling into the same pattern of seeking recourse in societal approval and seeing that as an end in itself and not a means for a broader social good.

For now, after graduation I am going into the IT industry as a software engineer. This is because I want to be able to create and implement my own solutions to problems I see which trouble me. After refining my skills I will use them to create something big… something that will help people. I hope this desire still lives strong in you.

Best,

Jake

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