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# Søren Kierkegaard The Rotation of Crops

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Søren Kierkegaard  
The Rotation of Crops:  
A Venture in a Theory of Social Prudence



People with experience maintain that proceeding from a basic principle is supposed to be very reasonable; I yield to them and proceed from the basic principle that all people are boring. Or is there anyone who would be boring enough to contradict me in this regard? This basic principle has to the highest degree the repelling force always required in the negative, which is actually the principle of motion. It is not merely repelling but infinitely repulsive, and whoever has the basic principle behind him must necessarily have infinite momentum for making discoveries. If, then, my thesis is true, a person needs only to ponder how corrupting boredom is for people, tempering his reflections more or less according to his desire to diminish or increase his impetus, and if he wants to press the speed of the motion to the highest point, almost with danger to the locomotive, he needs only to say to himself: Boredom is the root of all evil. It is very curious that boredom, which itself has such a calm and sedate na-

ture, can have such a capacity to initiate motion. The effect that boredom brings about is absolutely magical, but this effect is one not of attraction but of repulsion.

How corrupting boredom is, everyone recognizes also with regard to children. As long as children are having a good time, they are always good. This can be said in the strictest sense, for if they at times become unmanageable even while playing, it is really because they are beginning to be bored; boredom is already coming on, but in a different way. Therefore, when selecting a nursemaid, one always considers essentially not only that she is sober, trustworthy, and good-natured but also takes into esthetic consideration whether she knows how to entertain children. Even if she had all other excellent virtues, one would not hesitate to give her the sack if she lacked this qualification. Here, indeed, the principle is clearly acknowledged, but things go on so curiously in the world, habit and boredom have gained the upper hand to such a degree, that justice is done to esthetics only in the conduct of the nursemaid. It would be quite impossible to prevail if one wanted to demand a divorce because one's wife is boring, or demand that a king be dethroned because he is boring to behold, or that a clergyman be exiled because he is boring to listen to, or that a cabinet minister be dis-

missed or a journalist be executed because he is frightfully boring.

Since boredom advances and boredom is the root of all evil, no wonder, then, that the world goes backwards, that evil spreads. This can be traced back to the very beginning of the world. The gods were bored; therefore they created human beings. Adam was bored because he was alone; therefore Eve was created. Since that moment, boredom entered the world and grew in quantity in exact proportion to the growth of population. Adam was bored alone; then Adam and Eve were bored en famille. After that, the population of the world increased and the nations were bored en masse. To amuse themselves, they hit upon the notion of building a tower so high that it would reach the sky. This notion is just as boring as the tower was high and is a terrible demonstration of how boredom had gained the upper hand. Then they were dispersed around the world, just as people now travel abroad, but they continued to be bored. And what consequences this boredom had: humankind stood tall and fell far, first through Eve, then from the Babylonian tower.

On the other hand, what was it that delayed the fall of Rome? It was bread and games. What is being done in our day? Is consideration being given to any means of amusement? On the contrary, our doom is

being expedited. There is the idea of convening a consultative assembly. Can anything more boring be imagined, both for the honorable delegates as well as for one who will read and hear about them? The country's financial situation is to be improved by economizing. Can anything more boring be imagined? . . . . .

Idleness, we are accustomed to say, is the root of all evil. To prevent this evil, work is recommended. But it is just as easy to see from the dreaded occasion as from the recommended remedy that this whole view is of very plebian extraction. Idleness as such is by no means a root of evil; on the contrary, it is truly a divine life, if one is not bored. To be sure, idleness may be the occasion of losing one's property etc., but the noble nature does not fear such things but does indeed fear being bored. The Olympian gods were not bored; happy they lived in happy idleness. A female beauty who neither sews nor spins nor irons nor reads nor plays an instrument is happy in idleness, for she is not bored. Idleness, then, is so far from being the root of evil that it is rather the true good. Boredom is the root of evil; it is that which must be held off. Idleness is not the evil; indeed, it may be said that everyone who lacks a sense for it thereby shows that he has not raised himself to the human level. There is an indefatigable activity that



shuts a person out of the world of spirit and places him in a class with the animals, which instinctively must always be in motion. There are people who have an extraordinary talent for transforming everything into a business operation, whose whole life is a business operation, who fall in love and are married, hear a joke, and admire a work of art with the same businesslike zeal with which they work at the office. The Latin proverb *otium est pulvinar diaboli* [idleness is the devil's pillow] is quite correct, but the devil does not find time to lay his head on this pillow if one is not bored. But since people believe that it is man's destiny to work, the antithesis idleness/work is correct. I assume that it is man's destiny to amuse himself, and therefore my antithesis is no less correct  
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Now, if boredom, as discussed above, is the root of all evil, what then is more natural than to seek to conquer it? But here, as everywhere, it is primarily a matter of calm deliberation, lest, demonically possessed by boredom in an attempt to escape it, one works one's way into it. All who are bored cry out for change. In this, I totally agree with them, except that it is a question of acting according to principle.

My deviation from popular opinion is adequately expressed by the phrase "rotation of crops." There might seem to be an ambiguity in this phrase, and if

I were to find room in this phrase for a designation of the ordinary method I would have to say that rotation of crops consists in continually changing the soil. But the farmer does not use the expression in this way. For the moment, however, I will use it in this way to discuss the rotation of crops that depends upon the boundless infinity of change, its extensive dimension.

This rotation of crops is the vulgar, inartistic rotation and is based on an illusion. One is weary of living in the country and moves to the city; one is weary of one's native land and goes abroad; one is weary of Europe and goes to America etc.; one indulges in the fanatical hope of an endless journey from star to star. Or there is another direction, but still extensive. One is weary of eating on porcelain and eats on silver; wearying of that, one eats on gold; one burns down half of Rome in order to visualize the Trojan conflagration. This method cancels itself and is the spurious infinity. What, after all, did Nero achieve? No, then the emperor Antoninus was wiser; he says: "You can begin a new life. Only see things afresh as you used to see them. In this consists the new life"

The method I propose does not consist in changing the soil but, like proper crop rotation, consists in changing the method of cultivation and the kinds of

crops. Here at once is the principle of limitation, the sole saving principle in the world. The more a person limits himself, the more resourceful he becomes. A solitary prisoner for life is extremely resourceful; to him a spider can be a source of great amusement. Think of our school days; we were at an age when there was no esthetic consideration in the choosing of our teachers, and therefore they were often very boring – how resourceful we were then! What fun we had catching a fly, keeping it prisoner under a nut-shell, and watching it run around with it! What delight in cutting a hole in the desk, confining a fly in it, and peeking at it through a piece of paper! How entertaining it can be to listen to the monotonous dripping from the roof! What a meticulous observer one becomes, detecting every little sound or movement. Here is the extreme boundary of that principle that seeks relief not through extensity but through intensity.

The more resourceful one can be in changing the method of cultivation, the better, but every particular change still falls under the universal rule of the relation between recollecting and forgetting. It is in these two currents that all life moves, and therefore it is a matter of having them properly under one's control. Not until hope has been thrown overboard does one begin to live artistically; as long as a person

hopes, he cannot limit himself. It is indeed beautiful to see a person put out to sea with the fair wind of hope; one may utilize the chance to let oneself be towed along, but one ought never have it on board one's craft, least of all as pilot, for it is an untrustworthy shipmaster. For this reason, too, hope was one of Prometheus's dubious gifts; instead of giving human beings the foreknowledge of the immortals, he gave them hope.

To forget – this is the desire of all people, and when they encounter something unpleasant, they always say: If only I could forget! But to forget is an art that must be practiced in advance. To be able to forget always depends upon how one experiences actuality. The person who runs aground with the speed of hope will recollect in such a way that he will be unable to forget. Thus *nil admirari* [marvel at nothing] is the proper wisdom of life. No part of life ought to have so much meaning for a person that he cannot forget it any moment he wants to; on the other hand, every single part of life ought to have so much meaning for a person that he can remember it at any moment. The age that remembers best is also the most forgetful: namely, childhood. The more poetically one remembers, the more easily one forgets, for to remember poetically is actually only an expression for forgetting. When I remember poetically, my

experience has already undergone the change of having lost everything painful. In order to be able to recollect in this way, one must be very much aware of how one lives, especially of how one enjoys. If one enjoys indiscriminately to the very end, if one continually takes the utmost that enjoyment can give, one will be unable either to recollect or to forget. That is, one has nothing else to recollect than a satiation that one only wishes to forget but that now torments with an involuntary recollection. Therefore, if a person notices that enjoyment or a part of life is carrying him away too forcefully, he stops for a moment and recollects. There is no better way to give a distaste for going on too long. From the beginning, one curbs the enjoyment and does not hoist full sail for any decision; one indulges with a certain mistrust. Only then is it possible to give the lie to the proverb that says that one cannot eat one's cake and have it, too. It is true that the police forbid carrying secret weapons, and yet there is no weapon as dangerous as the art of being able to recollect. It is a singular feeling when in the midst of enjoyment one looks at it in order to recollect it.

When an individual has perfected himself in the art of forgetting and the art of recollecting in this way, he is then able to play shuttlecock with all existence . . . . .

The art of recollecting and forgetting will also prevent a person from foundering in any particular relationship in life – and assures him complete suspension.

Guard, then, against friendship. How is a friend defined? A friend is not what philosophy calls the necessary other but the superfluous third. What are the rituals of friendship?

One drinks *dus*; one opens an artery, mingles one's blood with the friend's. Just when this moment arrives is difficult to determine, but it proclaims itself in a mysterious way; one feels it and can no longer say *De* to the other. Once this feeling is present, it can never turn out that one has made a mistake such as *Gert Westphaler* made when he drank *dus* with the executioner. – What are the sure signs of friendship? Antiquity answers: "agreement in likes and dislikes, this and this only is what constitutes true friendship" – and is also extremely boring. What is the meaning of friendship? Mutual assistance with counsel and action. Two friends form a close alliance in order to be everything to each other, even though no human being can be anything for another human being except to be in his way. Well, we can help each other with money, help each other into and out of our coats, be each other's humble ser-

vants, gather for a sincere New Year's congratulation, also for weddings, births, and funerals.

But just because one stays clear of friendship, one will not for that reason live without contact with people. On the contrary, these relationships can take a deeper turn now and then, provided that one always-- even though keeping the same pace for a time -- has enough reserve speed to run away from them. It may be thought that such conduct leaves unpleasant recollections, that the unpleasantness consists in the diminishing of a relationship from having been something to being nothing. This, however, is a misunderstanding. The unpleasantness is indeed a piquant ingredient in the perverseness of life. Moreover, the same relationship can regain significance in another way. One should be careful never to run aground and to that end always to have forgetting in mind. The experienced farmer lets his land lie fallow now and then; the theory of social prudence recommends the same thing. Everything will surely come again but in a different way; what has once been taken into the rotation process remains there but is varied by the method of cultivation. Therefore, one quite consistently hopes to meet one's old friends and acquaintances in a better world but does not share the crowd's fear that they may have changed so much that one could not rec-

ognize them again. One fears, instead, that they may be altogether unchanged. It is unbelievable what even the most insignificant person can gain by such sensible cultivation.

Never become involved in marriage. Married people pledge love for each other throughout eternity. Well, now, that is easy enough but does not mean very much, for if one is finished with time one is probably finished with eternity. If, instead of saying "throughout eternity," the couple would say "until Easter, until next May Day," then what they say would make some sense, for then they would be saying something and also something they perhaps could carry out. What happens in marriage? First, one of them detects after a short time that something is wrong, and then the other one complains and screams: Faithlessness! Faithlessness! After a while, the other one comes to the same conclusion and a state of neutrality is inaugurated through a balancing of accounts by mutual faithlessness, to their common satisfaction and gratification. But it is too late now, anyway, because a divorce involves all kinds of huge problems.

Since marriage is like that, it is not strange that attempts are made in many ways to shore it up with moral props. If a man wants to be separated from his wife, the cry goes up: He is a mean fellow, a



scoundrel, etc. How ridiculous, and what an indirect assault upon marriage! Either marriage has intrinsic reality, and then he is adequately punished by losing it, or it has no reality, and then it is unreasonable to vilify him because he is wiser than others. If someone became weary of his money and threw it out the window, no one would say he is a mean fellow, for either money has reality, and then he is adequately punished by not having it anymore, or it has no reality, and then, of course, he is indeed wise.

One must always guard against contracting a life relationship by which one can become many. That is why even friendship is dangerous, marriage even more so. They do say that marriage partners become one, but this is very obscure and mysterious talk. If an individual is many, he has lost his freedom and cannot order his riding boots when he wishes, cannot knock about according to whim. If he has a wife, it is difficult; if he has a wife and perhaps children, it is formidable; if he has a wife and children, it is impossible. Admittedly, there is the example of a gypsy woman who carried her husband on her back throughout life, but for one thing this is a great rarity and, for another, it is very tiring in the long run – for the husband. Moreover, through marriage one falls into a very deadly continuity with custom, and custom is like the wind and weather, something

completely indeterminable. To the best of my knowledge, it is the custom in Japan for the husbands also to be confined during childbirth. Perhaps the time is coming when Europe will import the customs of foreign lands.

Even friendship is dangerous; marriage is still more dangerous, for the woman is and will be the man's ruination as soon as he contracts a continuing relationship with her. Take a young man, spirited as an Arabian horse; let him marry and he is lost. At the outset, the woman is proud, then she is weak, then she swoons, then he swoons, then the whole family swoons. A woman's love is only pretense and weakness.

Just because one does not become involved in marriage, one's life need not for that reason be devoid of the erotic. The erotic, too, ought to have infinity – but a poetic infinity that can just as well be limited to one hour as to a month. When two people fall in love with each other and sense that they are destined for each other, it is a question of having the courage to break it off, for by continuing there is only everything to lose, nothing to gain. It seems to be a paradox, and indeed it is, for the feelings, not for the understanding. In this domain it is primarily a matter of being able to use moods; if a person can

do that, an inexhaustible variation of combinations can be achieved.

Never take any official post. If one does that, one becomes just a plain *John Anyman*, a tiny little cog in the machine of the body politic. The individual ceases to be himself the manager of the operation, and then theories can be of little help. One acquires a title, and implicit in that are all the consequences of sin and evil. The law under which one slaves is equally boring no matter whether advancement is swift or slow. A title can never be disposed of, it would take a criminal act for that, which would incur a public whipping, and even then one cannot be sure of not being pardoned by royal decree and acquiring the title again.

Even though one stays clear of official posts, one should nevertheless not be inactive but attach great importance to all the pursuits that are compatible with aimlessness; all kinds of unprofitable pursuits may be carried on. Yet in this regard one ought to develop not so much extensively as intensively and, although mature in years, demonstrate the validity of the old saying: It doesn't take much to amuse a child.

Just as one varies the soil somewhat, in accordance with the theory of social prudence (for if one were to live in relation to only one person, rotation of crops would turn out badly, as would be the case if a

farmer had only one acre of land and therefore could never let it lie fallow, something that is extremely important), so also must one continually vary oneself, and this is the real secret. To the end, it is essential to have control over one's moods. To have them under control in the sense that one can produce them at will is an impossibility, but prudence teaches us to utilize the moment. Just as an experienced sailor always scans the sea and detects a squall far in advance, so one should always detect a mood a little in advance. Before entering into a mood, one should know its effect on oneself and its probable effect on others. The first strokes are for the purpose of evoking pure tones and seeing what is inside a person; later come the intermediate tones. The more practice one has, the more one is convinced that there is often much in a person that was never imagined. When sentimental people, who as such are very boring, become peevish, they are often amusing. Teasing in particular is an excellent means of exploration.

Arbitrariness is the whole secret. It is popularly believed that there is no art to being arbitrary, and yet it takes profound study to be arbitrary in such a way that a person does not himself run wild in it but himself has pleasure from it. One does not enjoy the immediate object but something else that one arbi-

trarily introduces. One sees the middle of a play; one reads the third section of a book. One thereby has enjoyment quite different from what the author so kindly intended. One enjoys something totally accidental; one considers the whole of existence from this standpoint; one lets its reality run aground on this. I shall give an example. There was a man whose chatter I was obliged to listen to because of the circumstances. On every occasion, he was ready with a little philosophical lecture that was extremely boring. On the verge of despair, I suddenly discovered that the man perspired exceptionally much when he spoke. This perspiration now absorbed my attention. I watched how the pearls of perspiration collected on his forehead, then united in a rivulet, slid down his nose, and ended in a quivering globule that remained suspended at the end of his nose. From that moment on, everything was changed; I could even have the delight of encouraging him to commence his philosophical instruction just in order to watch the perspiration on his brow and on his nose.

Baggesen tells somewhere that a certain man is no doubt a very honest fellow but that he has one thing against him: nothing rhymes with his name. It is very advantageous to let the realities of life be undifferentiated in an arbitrary interest like that. Something accidental is made into the absolute and

as such into an object of absolute admiration. This is especially effective when the feelings are in motion. For many people, this method is an excellent means of stimulation. Everything in life is regarded as a wager etc. The more consistently a person knows how to sustain his arbitrariness, the more amusing the combinations become. The degree of consistency always makes manifest whether a person is an artist or a bungler, for up to a point everyone does the same. The eye with which one sees actuality must be changed continually. The Neoplatonists assumed that people who fell short of perfection on earth became after death more or less perfect animals according to their merits; those who, for example, had practiced social virtues on a minor scale (punctilious people) turned into social creatures – for example, bees. Such a view of life, which here in this world sees all human beings transformed into animals or plants (Plotinus also believed this – that some were changed into plants) offers a rich multiplicity of variation. The artist Tischbein has attempted to idealize every human being as an animal. His method has the defect that it is too serious and tries to discover an actual resemblance.

The accidental outside a person corresponds to the arbitrariness within him. Therefore he always ought to have his eyes open for the accidental, always

ought to be ready if something should come up. The so-called social pleasures for which we prepare ourselves a week or a fortnight in advance are of little significance, whereas even the most insignificant thing can accidentally become a rich material for amusement. To go into detail here is not feasible – no theory can reach that far. Even the most elaborate theory is merely poverty compared with what genius in its ubiquity easily discovers.