

Some Notes on Sleep

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No matter how great my weariness, the wrench of parting with consciousness is unspeakably repulsive to me. I loathe Somnus, that black-masked headsman binding me to the block.

V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p. 108.

**Sleep.*

Sleep is astonishing; and it is all the more so because it hardly evokes any astonishment at all. We fear death and the termination of ourselves, and yet each night we willingly part with consciousness as if it were no more significant than taking off a hat.

But alas, we must endure sleep, for our exhausted bodies will have it no other way. Indeed, as most insomniacs know, waking life is barely tolerable without sleep, and for this reason I do not wish to take issue with this kind of *required sleep*. My concern is rather for a different kind of sleep—for which I am at a loss for an apt term, but which I will tentatively call *surplus sleep* or *the sleep of the chronic sleeper*. This kind of sleep is not, I believe, employed to rejuvenate the self, say, in order to prepare it for more meaningful tasks; but rather it is employed simply in the absence of *anything else to do*. Of course, there is always something to do, and interest can be summoned from every detail of the world; but none of this seems to touch the chronic sleeper. The world (and she herself) fails to attract her—perhaps she is bored—and thus she falls into sleep.

**The choice of sleep.*

The choice to sleep is a strange one indeed, because it is not really a choice between two alternate paths along which one can proceed. If sleep is a movement at all, it is one of recession, a falling back from the self and world, a retreat. We may wonder what such a choice says about the person's attitude towards her life, towards the world and herself. This is precisely what troubles me about the chronic sleeper: that she opts for the perfect night of sleep rather than the daylight of awareness, as if there were nothing in the world worth staying awake for. It is as if the world has nothing to offer, like

a shop of undesirable wares, it neither solicits nor holds her attention. We might, once again, suggest that she is bored.

There are at least two kinds of boredom: one that is specific and more or less easily remedied (like the boredom experienced during a dull lecture or a shallow conversation); and the other is general and profound, draining the world of color and worth, making it a gray place that fails to capture or touch us, where every alternative is as dull as the next. With this kind of boredom, the world is united under the flag of indifference.

Obviously, I cannot claim with any certainty that the many chronic sleepers that I see on the train each day are profoundly bored; but nevertheless I am forced to wonder how these people can prefer the emptiness of sleep, uniform, empty and unexperienced, over the myriad attractions of waking life.

**Insomnia.*

It would be simple enough to claim, therefore, that insomniacs have it figured out insofar as they remain awake longer than the average sleeper. But of course the insomniac is not content with his wakefulness and indeed the twilight of his unrelieved vigil is an agony and in some cases a sickness of the most pernicious kind. The absence of sleep makes the insomniac's wakefulness a burden and he is in this sense inescapably stuck with himself. Alas, we require sleep for our frail bodies and without it our waking life is ruined.

Insomnia is "where the work of being never lets up." (Levinas, 1978, p. 65)

**Dreams.*

When I claim that sleep begets no experience, it seems as if I am ignoring dreams, or possibly claiming that they beget no experience. Of course I wish to say nothing of the kind: dreams are most certainly experience—a wonderful and rich kind at that. Regarding dreams we can say many things: there can be a phenomenology of dreams (psychoanalysis, for instance). But there can be no such phenomenology for sleep, towards which the eye of experience is forever shut. "He who dreams sleeps, but already he who dreams is he who sleeps no longer." (Blanchot, 1982, p. 267) And so my concern for sleep is fundamentally different from any analysis of dreams, precisely because in dreams we have already left sleep and have, in a qualified sense to be sure, returned to experience.

**The desire for sleep.*

What would this be? A desire for rest, quietude and peace? All of these states, however, are states of consciousness and without consciousness (i.e. in the absence of a subject) there can be nothing like peace or quiet. The dead man and the sleeper are not subjectively at rest, precisely because their subjectivity has ceased.

**Chronic Sleepers.*

I have met several people who have described sleep as a hobby. At first I thought the comment was a casual joke, however I was surprised to learn that these chronic sleepers enjoy nothing so much as to sleep early, wake up late and, on holidays, hardly wake up at all. In this sense, sleep is indeed the ultimate *pastime* in that there is certainly no more effective way to *pass the time*. In sleep, time passes as if no time has passed at all. And in that dreamless sleep that is the most revitalizing of all, one is given the impression that between the blink of consciousness, the falling in and out of sleep, only a moment has passed.

Of course, in the standard sense of *pastime*, meaning *hobby* or a particular enjoyment, sleep is completely inappropriate—so much so that if someone says that sleep is their hobby, we can assume that they have misunderstood one of the terms. Sleep cannot (any more than death) be a hobby or pastime, precisely because it begets no experience. And in the absence of experience, all talk of enjoyment is nonsense. We can enjoy tennis or sipping on wine, as these are both experiences about which we can say something. But as for the experience of sleep, which is no experience at all, we must remain silent.

That said, a concern still remains: what kind of life would one have to lead to assert that, of all the possible ways to pass time, sleep is the most preferable? This is a striking confession, insofar as it calls into question the quality of the chronic sleeper's waking life. She is effectively stating that rather than some or any experience, rather than remaining conscious and aware, she would rather fill her time with *no experience at all*.

**The question of the worth or value of sleep.*

The question of sleep that I am raising here is a question about value, and whether time spent in sleep is wasted or worthless time. I realize that making any kind of value judgment on how someone spends their time is bound to come across as pretentious. Indeed, who am I, or anyone for that matter, to tell another what he or she ought to do with their time?

Since the issue at hand is neither epistemological (i.e. dealing with truth) nor ethical (i.e. dealing with our obligations in regard to others) it is reasonable to wonder upon what grounds a criticism of sleep could be founded. This is further complicated by the fact that a criticism of sleep cannot proceed along standard critical lines, claiming that sleep is better or worse than some other thing. This (and every) kind of criticism involves comparison and judgment—and these are tools that cannot be applied in the case of sleep. Sleep, which begets no experience, cannot be meaningfully compared with states and objects of experience. Regarding two objects of experience (like showering and bathing, say) we are able to say any number of things, comparing and contrasting them appropriately, precisely because these phenomena exist for us *as experience*. This sort of activity is not possible in the case of sleep, because sleep is something that, by its very nature, we have never experienced. *A fortiori*, there can be no phenomenology of sleep.

**The experience of sleep.*

The experience of falling asleep is the experience of the coming-to-an-end of experience—to be sure, we are never there for the end of this becoming. In sleep, I am not in a void or a blackness wherein nothing confronts me, but rather I am in a place where both the “I” and the “place” disappear. Both terms of existence, both the subject and the object, no longer persist. Obviously, there can be no experience here. Paraphrasing Epicurus on the subject of death, *where sleep is, we are not; where we are, sleep is not*.

I mentioned above that there can be nothing like a phenomenology of sleep. I should qualify this: if we mean a phenomenology of sleep that attempts to describe what it is like *to be asleep*, then there can be no such thing. The same can be said of a phenomenology of death. If, on the other hand, like Heidegger’s analysis of death (which is certainly not a phenomenology of the state of being dead), we aim to describe something like our *attitude or relation towards* sleep, then such an analysis could be properly called phenomenological.

**Seneca and how we spend our time.*

“It is not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it.” (Seneca, 1997, p. 1) Seneca’s wisdom loses none of its force when applied to our time. Despite (or perhaps because of) the technology of convenience that has developed today, we waste just as much time in idleness and sloth as ever. Many complain about not having enough time, but, as Seneca points out, we are cause of this lack—we are our own robbers. Seneca argues that much of the time that we spend in idleness

or, conversely, in numbing preoccupation is essentially lost time—i.e. time that, when reflected upon, either is not our own (for example, when we slave away at deadening work or wait in impatience for the arrival of a client or a train) or carries so little weight for us that it might not have passed at all (squabbling pointlessly, counting one's money, etc.). Only those, Seneca says, who make time for philosophy and introspection are really alive (Ibid., p. 23). While non-philosophers may take issue with such a wholesale dismissal of non-philosophical enterprises, Seneca seems to be more broadly arguing that only when we are thoughtful and contemplative does our time take on a greater weight and length—both of which translate into meaningfulness.

What about time spent in sleep? Seneca says nothing about it, but he gives a striking example of a rich man, so pampered by his servants, who had to ask whether or not he was now sitting or laying down. Rotted with excessive luxury and so insensible to his own body and mind, Seneca says of the man that “he is ill, or even, he is dead. The man who is really at leisure is also aware of it. But this one who is only half alive, and needs to be told the positions of his own body—how can he have control over any of his time?” (Ibid., p. 20) Seneca is certainly right to take such a sloth to task, but how much more extreme is the situation when the man, asleep, is not even conscious? How much more perfectly does he squander his time when no experience at all can be made of it? Even Seneca's lazy man is, if only because he is still awake, better than the sleeper who experiences nothing.

Seneca's basic argument is that some kinds of experience are just better than others, and while we may disagree with his standard of judgment (namely that time spent unphilosophically is wasted time) we probably all agree that such kinds of judgment can plausibly be made. Our problem here is that we are trying to compare sleep to consciousness. The latter is defined by experience, while the former begets no experience at all. Can such a comparison be intelligibly made? Is it possible to assert that having some or any experience is better or more worthwhile than having no experience? This seems problematic for many reasons.

The most obvious is that terms like *value* and *worth* are necessarily born in and dependent on experience, thus making it senseless to talk about them in its absence. To say that something has more value than nothing is inappropriate precisely because *nothing* can have neither high nor low value—it transcends value.

While this comparison is difficult (and perhaps impossible) to make, I think that as experiencing beings, who define ourselves through our commitments (i.e. what we value) and actions (i.e. how we realize or fail to realize those commitments), it is important to argue that yes, experience is better

than no experience at all. Some relevant examples will make it clearer that, at least intuitively, we believe in the validity of this claim.

Imagine a man who visits a gallery of oil paintings with a blindfold on. Of course, since he is conscious, his visit constitutes some kind of experience; however, insofar as there is very little to touch, lick, smell or hear from the paintings, we might reasonably accuse the man of having wasted his time, of having—in an especially perverse manner—intentionally forfeited the experience that the paintings had to offer—namely, to *show* themselves. He has closed himself off from this experience when he might have easily enjoyed it. We might say something similar to the man who stops his nose in a perfumery or plugs his ears to the sound of the concert he has gone to attend. In such cases, the relevant experience is preemptively denied entrance and audience with us: the castle gates are, as it were, shut.

The perfection of this refusal to experience comes in sleep. Not only are the experiences of the senses denied, but so is the (more profound) experience of ourselves. We are closed to the world and ourselves. Imagine a traveler who visits Paris (or some such delicious destination) only to sleep the entire time. Again, we would accuse him of having wasted his time in profitless sleep. Our reaction to his actions seems to show that we value experience over non-experience. We feel that, at least as far as his own values are concerned, the sleeper in Paris has done something wrong. Paris offered itself and he refused it. The perversity of such a person seems so obvious when we send them to Paris, where there exists the traveler's imperative to *experience everything*; however, is not the chronic sleeper just as guilty of wasting her time? Certainly, the train to and from school or work may not be as exciting as the streets to Paris, but there is always something to do. Interest in the world can be summoned anywhere and even the most banal and familiar scenery can become uncanny and fascinating under our attention—if only we bother to stay awake.

**The length of a sleeper's life.*

The sleeper is both older and younger than she realizes. Older, because the rack of time has stretched her out longer than her experience can measure; and younger, because her waking life is so much more brief than the sum of her years.

**The use of sleep.*

Putting aside for the moment the problem of the chronic sleeper, I would like to turn my attention to sleep in general. It seems to me that sleep in itself, as an *end*, cannot be judged either good or bad,

precisely as such judgments can only apply to the phenomena of experience. But as a *means* sleep can perhaps be praised. Sleep prepares us for the world. We submit to the void of sleep because, assured of waking, we know that the possibilities of tomorrow are somehow conditioned upon this nightly surcease. Our care for tomorrow, our immediate futurity is expressed, therefore, in our submission to sleep. Sleep, because there is nothing in it for us to experience, is the ultimate *means* towards the task of living. “[Unconsciousness as sleep] is a participation in life by non-participation, by the elementary act of resting.” (Levinas, 1978, p. 69) The paradox here is of course that our care for and interest in the world must be paid for by stepping out of it for a time. We must part with our consciousness of the world in order to love it. Without sleep, in the gray grip of insomnia, the world ceases to solicit of care and interest—not because it disappears, but rather precisely because it *remains*.

As Levinas points out, the insomniac can no longer love the world. The world, for him, becomes a burden precisely because he is unable to shake it off, even temporarily, through the act of sleep. It is in insomnia that being becomes a heaviness, as if the air surrounding us were made thick. “The bare fact of presence is oppressive; one is held to being, held to be. One is detached from any object, any content, yet there is presence.” (Ibid., p. 65) Here the world cannot be enjoyed, nor can it be ignored, like an unceasing noise, quiet and unrecognizable. The narrator of David Fincher’s 1999 film *Fight Club* describes the experience of insomnia in the following terms: “With insomnia, nothing’s real. Everything’s far away, everything’s a copy of a copy of a copy. When you have insomnia, you’re never really asleep... and you’re never really awake.” In insomnia we find ourselves at an interminable distance from the world; not because it evades us, but because what presents itself to us is so uncanny, so barely real that we feel as if we were witnessing a poorly wrought theatre of the world. But the torture of insomnia is that we cannot turn away from this fakery, it surrounds us on every side, forcing us to watch this mock mimesis.

It is here that we can locate the true use of sleep: in sleep, we are allowed to rest, we are given a hiatus from being so that we may once again *wake up* to the world. Consciousness positions itself upon waking, and both I and the world return, not completely new perhaps, but at least refreshed. Sleep is the condition for this refreshment, for this striking out into the world anew—a fact that regular sleepers are prone to forget, but that the insomniac knows with the utmost poignancy.

**Boredom and sleep.*

I have tried to describe the undeniably essential use of sleep above: sleep, while it dissolves both the world and ourselves in its empty embrace, at least returns everything to us upon waking, in the freshness of the morning light. It is our love for the world in which we find ourselves that brings us to sleep and makes it essential. However, I am skeptical as to whether this romance with being remains true in the case of the chronic sleeper. The chronic sleeper acts and speaks as if sleep was the goal, rather than the means. On trains, he is anxious to sit, not because he wishes to enjoy this position of repose (for to *enjoy* it he would have to stay awake); but he sits to sleep. Once sitting his head lolls and he is gone, knocking back and forth between his neighbors like a stupid metronome or one of those inflatable clowns. On his days off, he sleeps, as if his body were a battery that could be charged up for use over the rest of the following workweek. Of course, when he returns to work, he is just as tired as ever.

If I have located the use of sleep in one's love for the world and for experience, I don't think that this applies in the case of the chronic sleeper. His sleep is not *for* anything; he is not resting himself so that he may wake up to the possibilities of the world. Instead, he sees none of these possibilities, or if he does, they have no interest for him and he opts rather for non-experience. What is his relationship with being? He cannot love it, for he flees from it. Nor is he oppressed by it, like the insomniac, who has too much of being. Rather, it seems to me that he is *bored* with it. The world no longer speaks to him and to its possibilities he can only show indifference. And having nothing that he wants to do, he sleeps—which is indeed a most effective solution (second only to death) to boredom. To remain awake would simply be to drag out his boredom, to show him all of the various possibilities of being that fail to touch him—but that remain possibilities nevertheless. Boredom is oppressive in its own way too, and resembles insomnia in this respect. However, the insomniac is oppressed by the presence of the world because what presents itself is so unworldly and fake. He would sleep so as to retrieve his world, so as to return to it afresh. His love for the world remains, if only the world and being would let up. He knows that to act and live, one must sometimes stop and rest. Blanchot sums this thought up nicely: "Sleep signifies that at a certain moment, in order to act it is necessary to cease acting—that at a certain moment, lest I lose my way in aimless roving, I must stop and manfully transform the instability of myriad possibilities into a single stopping point upon which I establish and reestablish myself." (Blanchot, 1982, p. 266) The bored man is stuck with being too, but it is a being that no longer solicits him: he remains untouched by being. He would rather flee into unconsciousness, where all of the dull uninteresting world (himself included) can

disappear. When I see such people, snatching at every chance to sleep they can get, I wonder whether they want to return to the world at all, so anxious are they to leave it....

References

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