

Inwardness made visible: Kierkegaard, the Holocaust and *Son of Saul*

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I.

Art often is the subject of philosophy; but it is rare that a work of art itself functions as philosophy, pursued by means other than language. In its cinematic way, *Son of Saul*, a film set in Auschwitz-Birkenau during the Holocaust, engages with the same set of problems that the nineteenth century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote about.

The film follows a day in the life of Saul, a member of the Sonderkommando, a group of mostly Jewish prisoners the Nazis forced to assist with herding people to the gas chambers, cleaning up, collecting valuable and burning the bodies in the crematoria. The film creates a direct, experiential engagement with these events by maintaining a singleminded, relentless focus on the minute-to-minute unfolding of Saul's world.

In long, unbroken shots, we see the reality of the death camp revealed, its textures made tangible. By using close-ups and shallow focus images throughout, Nemes gives viewers little opportunity to disengage from Saul's point of view; it is as though we are shadowing him in hell. In immersing the viewer this way, Nemes places us there with Saul. This seems to be a moral imperative as well as an aesthetic choice. By eliciting a full, visceral engagement, the film embodies the respect for the singular events of the Holocaust that more commercial treatments of the subject fail at. The film is a thoroughly personal, *subjective* account of the Holocaust.

The movie's central theme is Saul's inner world, the loss and recovery of his soul. In scene after scene we see his face unmoved, his eyes watching but remote; there is a repellent sense of his — and our own — indifference. But then he witnesses a young boy briefly surviving the gas, only to be put to death a few minutes later by a Nazi doctor, possibly Josef Mengele. From this moment, he becomes consumed by the idea of giving the boy a proper Jewish burial. He claims the boy is his son. Saul's backstory is entirely missing from the film — we don't even learn if he really had a son — but that is beside the point. What matters, to him and to us is that he is able to feel again.

II.

Much of Kierkegaard's philosophy is a warning against the tendency — greatly accelerated in modern times — to take an increasingly objective, abstract perspective on the world. While the paradigm example of this is science — whose growing success Kierkegaard gravely regretted — it is most problematic when applied to one's own life and existence. To identify life with its abstractions is, in Kierkegaard's view, a dangerous but all too common error.

There are generally two, radically different ways to relate to the world: objective and subjective. Objectivity is an orientation towards reality based on abstracting away, in various degrees, from subjective experience, and from individual points of view. A subjective orientation, on the other hand, is based on an attunement to the inner experience of feeling, sensing, thinking and valuing that

unfolds in our day-to-day living. This distinction has been brought into contemporary philosophical discourse most notably by Thomas Nagel, in a number of his essays.¹

The spectacular success of science in the past 300 years has raised hopes that it also holds the key to guiding human beings towards a good life. Psychology and neuroscience has become a main source of life advice in the popular media. But philosophers have long held reservations about this scientific orientation to how to live life. The 18th century Scottish philosopher David Hume, for instance, famously pointed out that no amount of fact can legislate value, moral or otherwise. You cannot derive *ought* from *is*. But there is a related, in some way more radical concern, expressed in Western philosophy most forcefully by Kierkegaard, and in literature by Dostoyevsky — both religiously inspired thinkers — namely that our experience of life matters in ineffable ways that no objective understanding of the world can capture. Wittgenstein, in a well-known letter to Ludwig von Ficker, the publisher of the *Tractatus*, claimed that “the whole point of the book is to show that what is important lies in what cannot be expressed” in a scientific language. Suppose there was a super-intelligent organism — in a twist on Frank Jackson’s knowledge argument — that lacked any feeling or experience, a creature of pure thought. Such a creature could, for example, know everything about the brain, even everything about the world at large, all in scientific terms; but it would know nothing of human significance.

This line of thought holds that human significance comes from subjective experience and that human beings cannot thrive without an orientation towards, and engagement with, the subjective experience of their lives, and that, as a matter of fact, a predominantly objective, conceptual orientation to oneself is detrimental to well-being. As Kierkegaard put it, “Science and scholarship want to teach that becoming objective is the way. Christianity teaches that the way is to become subjective, to become a subject.”

Science is the best we have in approaching the world objectively. But in fact it is not science per se that is the problem, from the point of view of subjectivity. It is objectivizing, in any of its forms. One can frame a decision, for example, in objective terms. One might decide between career choices by weighing differences in workloads, prestige, pay and benefits between, say, working for an advanced technology company vs. working for a studio in Hollywood. We are often encouraged to make choices by framing them in this way. Alternatively, one might try to frame the decision more in terms of what it *might be like* to work in either occupation; in this case, one needs to have the patience to dwell in experience long enough for one’s feelings about either alternative to emerge. In other words, one might deliberate subjectively.

This is, of course, a crude opposition. We hardly ever deliberate purely objectively or purely subjectively. And there are built-in limits to subjective decision-making. Often, as the philosopher Laurie Paul has argued², we are not even in a position to imagine what our lives will be like after a life-altering decision. The bottom line is, the Kierkegaardian doctrine goes, there has been a steady push in society toward more objectivity, and less engagement with subjectivity, with what is -- sometimes derisively -- called inwardness. There is less of a tendency for modern humans to live thoroughly immersed in life, experiencing it, and more of a tendency of being mostly distracted by its abstractions, by all the ways our culture conceptually frames our existence as individuals,

¹ Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*. Oxford University Press, 1989.

² Laurie Paul, *Transformative Experience*, Oxford University Press, 2015.

Democrats and Republicans, man and women, one percenters, workers, consumers, and so on. And it is a problem: by becoming less subjective, one cuts oneself off from sources of meaning and value.

III.

One does not have to agree with Kierkegaard's single-minded, hostile rejection of objective thought and objectivity to still consider what he has to say about the cultivation of subjectivity, because that is where his major insights lie. So what about his exhortation to *become* subjective? At first sight the idea that we can *become* more or less subjective might seem problematic; as a matter of fact, it seems that one cannot *fail* to be a subject, to be given all that experience. However, as Kierkegaard points out, the mind can flee its own subjectivity; instead of dwelling in the presence of one's experience, one can escape into alienation; into theorizing about needs, goals and happiness, and live by abstract principles and objective measures. As Freud has described, there are various ways of doing this: by repressing experience, dissociating from it, numbing it, turning away from it.

Most commonly, we turn our back on subjectivity to escape from pain. Suffering, one's own, or others', might become bearable, one hopes, when one takes a step back and views it objectively, conceptually, abstractly. And when it comes to something as monumental as the Holocaust, one's mind cannot help but be numbed by the sheer magnitude of it. How could one feel the pain of all those people, sympathize with millions? Instead one is left with the "facts," the numbers.

"Son of Saul" approaches its stupefying subject in a way that echoes Kierkegaard's imperative. The audience is not given any space to distance from Saul's reality or turn it into an abstraction of suffering, innocence, or goodness; the film doesn't depict the story of the Holocaust in generic ways that would encourage getting lost in a historical account. Rather, it allows viewers to *feel* its textures, and perceive the sights and sounds that make up individual experience. By not wavering, by keeping to this scheme, *Son of Saul* provides knowledge. It depicts what many critics have argued could not be depicted.

It achieves this by not letting the viewer off the hook, by demanding participation, as far as it is possible in the imagination, in the experience of the Holocaust. As Kierkegaard puts it in "Either/Or," "For one may have known a thing many times and acknowledged it ... and yet it is only by the deep inward movements, only by the indescribable emotions of the heart, that for the first time you are convinced that what you have known belongs to you ... for only the truth that edifies is truth for you."

In addition to employing a subjective approach visually, Nemes also makes subjectivity the theme of the film. It depicts the loss of subjectivity both writ large, at the societal level, and writ small, at the level of the individual. It is this double engagement of subjectivity that makes the film so effective.

The death camp is the absurd end point of technological thinking, of the objectification of human beings. Totalitarian regimes the world over know the value and power of subjectivity – that is why they work so hard to destroy it. Murdered Jews are referred to as "pieces" in the movie by the German camp administrators. The victims are denied the status of subjects — they are mere physical objects to be dealt with. In this world of mechanized objectivity, the Nazi's industrial

brutality is considered entirely normal. Any individual not obeying its construct of proper behavior only has their own conscience to rely on. Imre Kertész, winner of the Noble Prize for Literature for his autobiographical novel about a Hungarian boy taken to Auschwitz, explained this vividly in his acceptance speech when he describes a crucial experience that contributed to writing the novel: “The experience was about solitude, a more difficult life ... the need to step out of the mesmerizing crowd, out of history, which renders you faceless and fateless.”

At a yet deeper level, it is the subjectivity of its protagonist that is the main theme of the movie. Through his encounter with the boy Saul gains back his soul. At the moment that Saul witnesses the killing of the boy, he becomes — in Kierkegaard’s beautiful expression — a Knight of Faith, someone who made a commitment, and who can pursue it with passion, as if it was the surest thing, even in the face of overwhelming odds. Saul is finally able to experience the death and destruction around him by committing to this one, dead boy; not unlike the film nudges the viewers to relate to the Holocaust as real, by committing them to this one, near dead protagonist. Having seen it you will remember, deliriously, having been there, in some small part of your body. It is a duty created by the Holocaust, suggests the movie. It is a dark counterpart of the imperative for Jews to relive the experience of deliverance from bondage into freedom each year at Passover.

At the same time that it depicts Saul’s conversion, *Son of Saul* also directly engages the viewer’s subjectivity by its style and mode of presentation; its achievement is to *embody* the dynamic that is its very subject matter. Kierkegaard called such communication — the only sort he thought befitting a subjective thinker — “double reflection.” He thought this is the only way that the authenticity of the message can be guarded — the only way to avoid being a “town crier” of subjectivity. In this way, *Son of Saul* is both art and philosophy: it makes inwardness visible. Through its depiction of death and destruction it reminds us how to live.