

CORONAVIRUS

On True and False Infinities

CULTURE

23_05_2020

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The playwright Arthur Miller, while he wrote, would place a card in full view in front of him with one word on it. The word was: forgo. It was a memo to himself to avoid bringing things to a head until the very last moment, so as to maintain the audience's speculations and engagement until the final curtain. In a way, the method catches also a key aspect of the religious sensibility. The "religious" person tends more than others to

postpone satisfaction and forgo immediate pleasure or reward in anticipation of an ultimate prize on the far side of the horizon. The religious person knows that every material thing eventually disappoints.

Joseph Ratzinger, many years ago, warned us against the “false infinities” that might mis-lead us as to the nature of existence. “Infinities” of some kind—satisfactions false or real— are essential. Otherwise, human beings would stop dead in their tracks, as though their batteries had suddenly died.

Desire for infinite, eternal reality, for the embrace of the Creator who generates us, is ultimately what enables us to transcend the limitation of the false infinities, which lure us astray and always leave us deflated. Man, diverted from the ultimate horizon, grows weary and skeptical. Materialism interposes itself for a time between him and the true destination of his desiring. For a time this encroachment proceeds unnoticed; but over the course of his life, a man discovers that his desiring for earthly things loses its lustre with escalating rapidity, that the false infinities become will-o-the-wisps. When this happens, a man will either look upward again to the horizon, or downward to the bottom of a glass or pill bottle in search of the dregs of hope. Shadowing these attempts at self-delusion is our ineluctable awareness that we are unable to find in this dimension what we seek: *We can't get no satisfaction*. But we try and we try and we try and we try.

In the encyclical *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI spelled out the process by which this works through a human life:

"Day by day, man experiences many greater or lesser hopes, different in kind according to the different periods of his life. Sometimes one of these hopes may appear to be totally satisfying without any need for other hopes. Young people can have the hope of a great and fully satisfying love; the hope of a certain position in their profession, or of some success that will prove decisive for the rest of their lives. When these hopes are fulfilled, however, it becomes clear that they were not, in reality, the whole. It becomes evident that man has need of a hope that goes further. It becomes clear that only something infinite will suffice for him, something that will always be more than he can ever attain. In this regard our contemporary age has developed the hope of creating a perfect world that, thanks to scientific knowledge and to scientifically based politics, seemed to be achievable. Thus Biblical hope in the Kingdom of God has been displaced by hope in the kingdom of man, the hope of a better world which would be the real “Kingdom of God.” This seemed at last to be the great and realistic hope that man needs. It was capable of galvanizing—for a time—all man's energies. The great objective seemed worthy of full commitment. In the course of time, however, it has become clear

that this hope is constantly receding. Above all it has become apparent that this may be a hope for a future generation, but not for me."

In the 1960s, freedom was redefined in Western cultures as the impulse to instantly cash in on every opportunity for pleasure, gain, and reward, with increasing skepticism about "the afterlife" providing an added rationale. The result was a growing but undiagnosed collective dissatisfaction—amounting to collective alienation—camouflaged by the creation of a "freedom escalator" on which previously unrecognized freedoms achieved in turn their fifteen minutes of fame.

The "boomers" (dread word, especially when it seems to include you) having already ceased to believe, then ceased to forgo—indeed repudiated that very idea—and all generations that followed implicitly acquiesced in their cultural leadership. Since then we have been constructing cultures in which the religious dimension—that certain sense of a place beyond the beyond—is broken off from the collective consciousness, and can be preserved within the individual consciousness only with the greatest attention. Life goes on, but largely by dint of the false infinities, which have become all-important. With God eclipsed in culture, even the best-adjusted souls need to utilise as stepping stones the tiny pleasures that enliven an otherwise nondescript, meaningless-seeming day.

My book *Beyond Consolation*, published a decade ago, was inspired by the death of a colleague, Nuala O'Faolain, at my then newspaper, *The Irish Times*, following a short illness with cancer. An atheist, she went on radio soon after she received the terminal diagnosis to speak about her grief and despair. In one section of the interview, she described how, after hearing the news, she had returned alone to her beloved Paris to revisit, one last time, "some of the joy of living." She booked a room in a swanky hotel and next morning went out in search of a café. She described buying a coffee and tartine, sitting down and thinking, "Well, this is it. I love this." She adored being there with her copy of the *International Herald Tribune* and her thick, crusty slice of bread and milky coffee. "And it worked great for half an hour. But then I walked too far and fell down and stuff and that didn't work out too well."

The devil is in the adjectives: "crusty," "milky," "International": all words denoting freedom, albeit of an ephemeral, fragile kind. Yet we instantly recognize the explosion of pure joy that such an evocation can release. The joy of being idle in a foreign country on a sunny morning in a trapped moment of pure, simple pleasure—a false infinity as real as anything earthly as long as it lasts, but here exposed in the dread light of imminent death. This is so sad: That Nuala did not come to see the "little infinities" as gifts, or

signs, from somewhere beyond. These things, the religious journey brings us to see, resonate only because there is beyond them the promise of something infinitely greater.

Coronavirus lockdown has brought us to a moment when, many of our “little infinities” withdrawn, we get to face the horizon with an enhanced chance of seeing that all joys, small and great, come from the same place. It has been remarked already how strange it is that COVID-19 hit the West at the start of Lent. But I wonder if there was before, across the whole of Western civilisation, a time when the access to both the churches of God and most of the cathedrals of Mammon were blocked at one and the same time. Not only are our churches closed, but so too are our shopping malls, gyms, and bars, the places to which Western populations have in recent years repaired to pursue the false-infinite joys that, if pursued obsessively, cause a short-circuit of the Infinite, Eternal, True connection.

Now, with the malls and pubs shuttered, we must make contact with infinities of whatever kind without assistance from middlemen. Although even in lockdown, there are still the off-mainstream diversionary delights on offer from Amazon and YouTube, we are mostly restricted to our contemplations, prayers and meditations, or else those lower-cased varieties of “infinity” capable of being accessed at home with a bottle opener, modem or remote control. It is hard, sometimes, to avoid the thought that this situation is the ambiguous gift of some mischievous, supernatural imagination, and not necessarily an evil one.

Secular materialism imposes pressure on all its subjects to foreshorten their horizons, to draw their desires closer to themselves so that they no longer stretch out toward an infinite Otherness. In today’s Germany, or Spain or Italy or France or Ireland, it is almost pointless to speak even to the general population about the hope that manifests in Christianity. Even the elderly are cast adrift before a destination that surges towards them, and in this transfixed situation they busy themselves with what they can settle for: those “little false infinities” that make a day seem to be worth living—the trip to the secondhand bookstore to pick up a bargain, the cup of coffee afterward in the café across the road, the stroll in the park listening to a podcast on earphones, meeting an old friend at the gate and luxuriating in another cuppa, and so forth.

It is strange, in an age of ceaseless talk about mental illness, that the authorities of so many countries have so blithely sentenced the elderly, cast adrift on a cultural rock of secular nihilism, to deprivation of these small pleasures—as though, just as they have forgotten about the indispensability of God, they have now forgotten about the indispensability of what replaced him. But perhaps, before the months of lockdown

become a barely credible half-memory, we may find time to meditate on an experience that, properly observed, may allow us to look more usefully into our driving mechanisms, and comprehend more precisely the nature of our tick-tocking.

Temporarily deprived of so many of our “little infinities,” perhaps we will see that these transient joys are just stepping stones on the road to lasting joys. Let us hope that, when they rediscover their courage, Church leaders will grasp the opportunity offered to remind their congregations of the true meanings of earthly moments of happiness, and direct them thereby to the deepest nature of reality.

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