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THE MEANING OF EXISTENCE AND OTHER PLEASANTRIES

by
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This last Monday I spent my after-class afternoon ridding my desk of most of the nonsense that had accumulated during a week's absence. I had spent that week talking with and to 4000 of my nearest and dearest friends gathered in the 37th International Medieval Congress. Late in the day I noted that the red triangular button on my telephone was flashing. Following step-by-step the instructions of Wayne Crawford, the quiet but incredibly efficient real ruler of the history and theology departments, I actually succeeded in calling up—if that is the verb—some four voice-mail messages. Two were from Ann Johnson, who informed me—the second time with some urgency—that I had been selected by your class to give a convocation address.

How odd, I thought. I added—to myself, of course—that I would do it. “That’ll teach them” was my last thought before packing up for home.

What I had forgotten was, of course, a topic. But that came almost instantly. That morning—this last Monday morning—I had spent my 11 to 11:50 near-hour in Gorman B with my Western Civ II students. This is my favorite class, though I gather from your expressions that it was not yours. We spent the hour cheerfully considering Friedrich Nietzsche’s insistence that there is no meaning, order, or purpose to existence. We spoke of Max Planck’s denial that science can ever gain knowledge of the really real. We recognized Jean-Paul Satre’s conviction that, in the face of the demise of the deity, we must all create a meaning for our own existence. And as you have surely already grasped, these cheering thoughts were directed toward inspiring the students to seek an existence somewhat beyond that of Homer Simson, beyond that provided

by sitcoms and six-packs, beyond life in the “unanimous and harmonious antheap” of mass culture which so frightened Fyodor Dostoevsky.

Close to the end of this pleasant conversation, Ms. Catherine Watson asked a question. This was rather cheeky of her I thought. Undaunted, Ms. Watson pressed her point, which was to discover the result of my own reflections on the meaning of existence. I fixed her with a monocular stare and replied: “My conviction can be summarized in one word, and that word is love.” “Everything else,” I said, “is but an elaboration on that word.” And it is some small portion of my understanding of that word that I should like to share with you today. For I am so deeply convinced that, without love, all existence is meaningless that I venture to proselytize in this shameless way. To help me, I shall call on one who shares my conviction, a dear friend named Aelred, who, in the early twelfth century, served as abbot of the Cistercian monastery of Rievaulx, situated in the lovely valley of the Rye in northern Yorkshire.

Aelred’s universe—and mine—is a world created out of, and informed by, God’s love.

This love [Aelred writes] sustains and contains all creatures, leaving nothing in disarray, nothing in disorder, nothing without some appropriate plan and place. Love is the heat of fire, the cold of water, the clarity of air, the opaqueness of earth. Love binds and joins all these opposing elements in all corporeal creatures, so that nothing is conjoined improperly; yet the disparate natures of these elements are not destroyed.

The law of nature is thus, for Aelred, the law of love. Aelred’s universe is the “delightful” creation of a God who makes all things in it holy through his overflowing goodness. So Aelred sees all nature immersed in a sea of love. He sees himself—and all other human beings—capable of, and engaged in, a truly divine activity: love.

And, for Aelred, truly human love—that is to say, divine love—is no mere sterile volitional choice of well being for one's neighbor. Aelred's love is a passionate love, it "is a kind of spontaneous and delightful inclination of the spirit toward someone." In one of Aelred's sermons, he calls this "attachment," which is, he says "a sort of spontaneous inclination of the mind toward someone—an inclination accompanied by delight." "Delightful" and "delight" are clearly words with an emotive content. And thus Aelred's soul is gifted with a faculty which goes beyond the traditional Augustinian triad of intellect, will, and memory. To the rational, volitional, perceptive, and imaginative powers of these faculties Aelred adds the powers of emotion and feeling.

Human beings are properly filled with emotions and attachments, Aelred says. To prove his point he offers the example of Jesus of Nazareth, for "...the God become man delighted in the human pleasure of attachment." And Aelred excuses his emotions at the death of his friend Simon by pointing to the tears shed by Jesus at the death of his friend Lazarus. Even unpleasant or aggressive feelings are not necessarily evil; Aelred can speak, for example, of "...wholesome anger..." Both "good" feelings and "bad" feelings—both "warm fuzzies" and "cold pricklies"—are natural and human, and thus can be morally good.

But Aelred's love is not only passionate, it is physical, not necessarily sexual, but necessarily physical. He describes the origin of physical attachment in this way: "Frequently, it is not someone's virtue or vice but their outward appearance which attracts one's attention. An elegant exterior, a pleasant way of speaking, a proper bearing, a charming countenance easily invite and ensure attachment..." Far from criticizing this very human sort of response, Aelred sees it as potentially productive of great good. Since Aelred believes the body is good, he sees no necessary evil in physical attraction and attachments.

For Aelred, the value of the human body is demonstrated unequivocally by the Incarnation. Jesus had a body, a body subject to all the needs and limitations of the flesh: “He hungered, thirsted, was sad; he wept, slept, was exhausted.” And corporeality was not a passing condition for the Son of Man: after his death he continued and continues to exist in the flesh. Thus the body is not a prison for the soul, as some affirm—those looking forward eagerly to “...ineffable bliss when they have been liberated from this dungeon.”

Even in the postlapsarian state, the real problem humans have is not with the body but with the soul. To Aelred, the body is not the “flesh” of which Paul spoke in *Galatians* (5:17), describing the warfare between the flesh and the spirit. Aelred reads Paul’s “spirit” as a soul renewed by the infusion of God’s love. “By the word flesh,” Aelred affirms, “Paul suggests the hapless slavery of the soul caused by the remnants of our former [unredeemed] condition.” Thus Aelred sees the warfare within fallen humans not as an opposition between body and soul, but as a conflict within the soul.

But the body is indeed ill-served by the postlapsarian soul. The body’s impulses are badly regulated by the intellect. The memory arouses these unregulated impulses through its recollection of past passions and sins. But it is the will which is the body’s most treacherous betrayer.

The body’s impulses toward sustenance, nurture, and procreation are all natural and good, but the human will abuses these impulses by directing them to false ends. Thus, it is an evil will which is responsible for any transgressions committed in the body. But, given a good will, good works result—“...works which we surely cannot perform without our body.” Aelred likens the human body to “...a saucy serving girl...,” sometimes unruly but often mistreated by her mistress, the soul. That mistress should use the body better by supplying her physical needs,

regulating her unruly impulses, and directing her toward the good deeds she alone is capable of doing.

Humans are animals; they have bodies. And, like all corporeal entities, they are, by their nature, social animals. For Aelred, this fundamental human characteristic is a reflection of a basic social need with which a loving God informs all of nature. From the very beginning of human existence, the social nature of the species was affirmed. Aelred's admiration for God's plan is clear; he writes:

How beautiful it is that the second human being was taken from the side of the first [see Genesis 2:21-22], so that nature might teach that all [humans] are equal—side by side, so to speak—and that there might be no superior or inferior in human affairs....Thus, from the very beginning, nature imprinted the desire for friendship and love in the human heart.

Aelred sees the universe informed by love. He insists on the value of passion, emotions, and feelings in the attainment of the attachments necessary to a truly human life. He values the body and the physical in the pursuit of holiness. Moreover, Aelred sees humans as naturally and necessarily social animals. All this means that the good life is necessarily a life of love lived in intimate association with others.

Aelred's message, then, is this: if you wish to be happy—and who does not—learn to be a lover. The happiness I wish for you is “not in some heaven lights years away,” but in the here and now. God takes care of the hereafter—rather nicely, I think—and no matter how you try to avoid him, I am sure, the “hound of heaven” will get you in the end.

My concern is for your happiness in the messy business of this life, in which I know from my own intensely painful experience that we can create purgatories and hells for ourselves. But

from my own experience too I can tell of the bliss which comes from forty-six years of married love, of the happiness which comes from forty-five years of love for and from four children, then their four spouses, and now *their* twelve children, of the deep sense of satisfaction which has resulted from forty-four years of loving thousands and thousands of students.

It is considered unmanly by many for men to express their love and affection openly. But I am too old to be embarrassed by anything. And so I shall say it: I love you; I love all of you. And I warn you: on the Sunday after next I shall behave as I have behaved at all previous graduation exercises: I shall hug anyone who does not flee my embrace.