

The Catholic Intellectual Tradition's Riposte to Nihilism

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The greatest philosophical conundrum to face modern thinkers has been that of determining meaning in a world that is seemingly indifferent to our existence and sufferings. In previous centuries, we had less information on the state of the cosmos and could place ourselves in a world that was structured logically and had a place for us in it, from which we could derive our meaning.

Now we are aware of certain disconcerting facts that undermine our previous confidence. The Milky Way is on a collision course with another galaxy, and we have only to wonder if our descendants will have made it long enough to survive only to eventually perish by the inevitable heat death of the universe, or if they will have destroyed themselves long before. Seems pretty bleak. But the Catholic intellectual tradition (CIT) has mustered some voices to the aid of the meaning-seeking descendants of apes in their quest to overcome the gloom. They don't speak with one voice and emphasize different components, but the fault line that runs through them is mainly consistent. To live a meaningful and purposeful life requires a relationship with other human beings and with God.

Looking from outside, the actor Peter Sellers led a life of unique ability and undeniable success. No one could equal his gift for imitation and few will ever be as triumphant in their line of work. And yet his inner life was small and chockablock with failed relationships. For all of his talent and success, he was incapable of creating a life full of meaning.

Charles Taylor would suggest this is because Sellers was looking for meaning and purpose in what other people could give him—applause and recognition—rather than sharing experiences and emotions. Taylor identifies three malaises that afflict the modern world: individualism, instrumental reason, and the political fallout from these ways of thinking. His belief is that the social benefits of the Enlightenment come with a cost and a cost that is coming due. Precisely, the focus on the rights of the individual and the wish to maximize efficiency at any price may have created a situation in which individuals end up deracinated and isolated. Taylor is glad that we can plot our own courses, act in good faith, and are encouraged to live authentically. But he worries the authentic life that many people aspire to can be degrading.

To address this, Taylor distinguishes between higher and lower forms of authenticity and explains that what he sees as desirably authentic requires a dialogue between people and the maintenance of relationships. This is what people like Sellers miss out on. Many people want to find themselves but don't realize that what they are looking for isn't their actual self, but a better version of it. They run about and always find the bad, old version because they didn't know where to find the good version. The only means by which we can find this better self is in a dialogic

relationship with others. Essentially, Taylor hopes that we will avoid the solipsism that might drink from the same well as individualism and that in avoiding that we will live authentic lives of meaning and purpose.

To further explore Taylor's philosophy, let's take the well-known case of Ebenezer Scrooge. His chief sin was not merely greed; it was a cold heart. A greedy man will at least make himself comfortable, entertain others, and may even give to charity, if only out of self-aggrandizement, though often enough in earnest. (Let's not oversimplify the human heart.) Scrooge ignored the conditions around him and lived in a self-imposed squalor, refusing to alleviate the suffering of others and imposing it upon himself through extreme austerity. Scrooge was a man of the world and a brother to none before he was haunted. He became a man of God once the scales were removed from his eyes by the ghosts and he lived with charity and fraternity in his heart.

Dorothy Day would recognize the hardness of that unreformed man and would be all too familiar with the poverty revealed by the Ghosts. In her writings Day's chief goal is to impress upon us the need to consider the plight of the poor. In "The Faces of Poverty" she explains why it is necessary to keep poverty in mind, for it is too easy for those of us who live in comfortable circumstances to forget and oversimplify the problems of those in poverty. I would say that the heart of her message is not just a call for social consideration, but a proposal that a life of meaning must be preoccupied with the fortune of our fellow men. For her, the source of this meaning is an obligation to our fellow men as brothers and sisters in Christ and that ignoring the pains of poverty is an affront to God. The relationships through which we gain meaning must not be limited to our friends and family; they must include a purposeful attempt to engage with the whole of humanity.

These lessons are also reflected in Pope Benedict XVI's "Charity in Truth." While the piece is in many ways a list of diagnoses, it also includes several prescriptions for our ills. For one thing, it recommends that people must be given the chance to support themselves and live in communion with one another. This is, of course, a call back to the spring of the Catholic intellectual tradition and the New Testament. The Pope reminds us that the fundamental interconnectedness of all people is at the heart of the message of Jesus. Of course, we can't solve all problems and will ultimately fail. That is where the message of redemption comes into play. It is the balm that soothes our wounds when everything falls apart, and it is what keeps out the infection of nihilism. The Catholic perspective is that through our efforts and faith we become closer to God, which is the supreme goal.

The Anglo-Saxon poem "The Wanderer" grapples with the same nihilism that threatens us. It tells the tale of an old retainer whose lord is dead and whose people have vanished. The warrior tells of his loss and how it felt all meaning was stripped from him. Ultimately, he says that the quest for meaning in this world is folly and if you want it, look for it in the next. This is mostly true; how can he find much meaning in relationships if everyone he knows is gone? But then, he

had meaning and one can say he still does. Pain is proof, isn't it? The meaning in his life was wrapped up in (ignoring the material items important to a Dark Ages-warrior) kinship and devotion.

This is a primitive version of what these CIT writers are trying to explain. We are defined by our relationships to other human beings, and in the Catholic view, this defines our relationship with God. Even the hermit is defined in this way, if only because of the absence of others. Charles Taylor might say that meaning is a phenomenon that must be expressed and observed in conversation. Our more theological writers would likely agree and add that the meaning observed in these interactions is strongly bound up in justice and are a simulacrum of our relationship with God. All agree that purpose must be found in tending the garden and harvesting meaning from a life of quality relationships.

Works Cited

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