

2. Against “Finitude”: How Understanding That We Are Not Only Finite Beings Can Help Cure Both Skepticism and Its Discontents

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But how can we help seeing that the essence of duration is to flow, and that the fixed placed side by side with the fixed will never constitute anything which has duration. It is not the “states,” simple snapshots we have taken once again along the course of change, that are real; on the contrary, it is flux, the continuity of transition, it is change itself that is real. This change is indivisible, it is even substantial. If our intelligence insists on judging it to be insubstantial [...] it is because it has replaced this change by a series of adjacent states; but this multiplicity is artificial as is also the unity one endows it with. What we have here is merely an uninterrupted thrust of change—of a change always adhering to itself in a duration which extends indefinitely.

HENRI BERGSON, *The Creative Mind*

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.

WILLIAM BLAKE

In this essay, I seek to follow and draw upon resources in Ludwig Wittgenstein (and in an important contemporary follower of his, Iain McGilchrist) in order to pose a radical question. I question here the conventional “wisdom” across philosophical traditions (and cleaved to equally strongly by Cavell and Derrida, and for that matter by

Richard Dawkins and Donald Davidson), that says—or rather even, simply *assumes*—that we are finite beings.

I do so by thinking about the nature of our lives, and showing how one's life is a kind of open-ended, endlessly potential whole rather than a finite thing. And by thinking about the nature of infinity, and showing how thinking of infinity as a completed object fails to think infinity (and of its contrast with finite sequences, with numbers) adequately.

This line of thinking leads me inevitably to think about God, and to set out how the idea of God as a kind of completed super-being can fundamentally mislead us, while a very different idea of God as *potentia* can help to 'complete' the kind of thinking engaged in, in this essay. By helping us to become clear about ways in which we are like (such a) God, and of ways in which we are thoroughly unlike (such a) God.

The life that one is living is one's one and only life. One clearly has in the relevant sense nothing to compare it to. As life is lived, the present is the leading edge of the open-ended totality(-to-date) of (one's) existence. Now; that totality might thus be said from the point of view of the one living it even to be a kind of infinity ... or, probably better, because less liable to mislead in ways that I shall indicate below: to be *non-finite*. It is "limited," as seen from without; but in a certain crucial sense it is "complete" and entire-unto-itself *without* being *limited*, as seen (felt, lived) from "within." For it is a whole that grows as one ages but, as experienced, it remains what it always was (i.e. *a whole* whose "limits" one describes "from the inside," as they ever-expand, *rather than* actually in any sense breaching or observing from without). It is not finite, in that it has nothing larger or other than it with which it can itself meaningfully be contrasted. Life, as lived, is this extraordinary possibility that in this crucial sense decidedly ill-fits the concept of being limited, of *having* (already) an end.

The term "complete" that I used at one point in the previous paragraph (albeit with scare-quotes around it) risks being misleading. The key sense in which one's life at any moment is 'complete' is really just that there is nothing necessarily *missing*

from it: one's life is always complete in the limited, negative but still important sense of being *not incomplete*. As, for instance, a life (or a game, or a speech, etc.) is incomplete if it has been *cut short*. Or possibly: As anything that is simply and genuinely finite could conceivably be argued to be incomplete (relative to a larger version of itself; or, some would say, relative to an alleged "actually-infinite" alternative?: see below, for my response to the latter thought.).

The essence of infinity, as Wittgenstein explicates, is that there can always be one more added.¹ This is true of life, as experienced: there can always be a succeeding moment. (Of course, this *doesn't* mean that there always *will* be a succeeding moment: it is true that there will be at every moment—until one's last...) This is "potential infinity" (in Aristotle's terms); whereas "actual infinity," a "completed" totality is, I would argue, not properly infinity. Anything completed, anything actual, is not properly infinite.

These thoughts fly firmly in the face of "conventional wisdom" in the philosophy of mathematics: it turns such "wisdom" on its head, to suggest that "potential infinity" is truer to the conceptual character of infinity than "actual infinity" is. For how can something actual—something that *is*—be "inferior" to something "merely" potential?!

Such seeming-craziness can emerge into clearer view (as the merest sanity) if we orient ourselves by way of the Heidegger—and Wittgenstein—influenced neuroscientist, Iain McGilchrist. His novel rendition of the left vs. right brain distinction, in his seminal work *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* can help us to understand why the conventional view seems so "natural"—and why it is awry.² McGilchrist sets out how the left brain mode of perception of the world has become dominant in our culture. That mode of perception, roughly, is never perception *of the world*; it is only perception of fragments. We are absolutely superb now at understanding details; science in its microscopic vision is

1. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, rev. edn., ed. G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees and G. E. M. Anscombe (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1978), 278-9, part V, sec. 19.

2. Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). See especially McGilchrist's discussion of this, including of the need to reverse the 'valences' of actual and potential infinity, in Lecture 3 of his Laing Lectures, delivered at Regent College, Vancouver, March 10 2016. See also McGilchrist's analysis of our tendency overly to *assimilate* mind and body at 220-3. Cf. also, on the same point, Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, rev. 4th edn., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2009), sec. 339, and for further examples, see 196, 317.

unrivalled. But it is as if we now see everything only through a microscope, or even through the wrong end of a telescope. We have lost the capacity for wholistic vision.

The conventional view gets things the wrong way around, in taking static actuality as categorially superior to open becoming. The unalloyed left brain would divide up time into a sequence of dimensionless points.³ From a left-brain perspective (e.g. that of “Analytical Philosophy”), doing so is simply analysis, harmless and indeed necessary. But there is no such thing as assembling time from dimensionless points.⁴ One needs to *begin* with dimension, with Bergsonian *flow* or *flux*; otherwise it is perpetually unavailable. Life, time as lived, is that flow.⁵

We tend (tacitly) to treat the finite as a kind of horribly inadequate version of infinity, and to treat the infinite as a kind of endlessly strung out finite. This is an example of how the left hemisphere alone, while it loves *dichotomies*, nevertheless seems incapable of seeing the true profundity of real *difference!* The left hemisphere is not open to *incommensurability*.

Life is not finite, in that it has nothing larger than itself with which it can saliently be contrasted. It is in that sense like the visual field, or like the universe (which is continually expanding—but not *into* anything). It is a whole, “but” a necessarily open-ended one. (The left hemisphere cannot comprehend how *wholes* exist, let alone *open-ended* wholes.)

Birth is not an event of life: birth is the radical *beginning* of life.⁶ This is true whether we count as 'birth' the moment of emergence from the mother's womb into the world, or some earlier or later time. The grey area surrounding when “precisely” one can be said to be born does not affect my present argument.⁷ Though: my argument should suggest, helpfully I think, that we should probably count as birth in the psychological/philosophical sense a period considerably before birth in the sense of entering into the world through the birth canal. It is probably an egocentric delusion

3. This can be seen in cases of serious damage to the right brain—see McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary*, 76.

4. See Rupert Read, “Against Time-Slices,” *Philosophical Investigations* 26, no. 1 (2003): 24-43.

5. See the Heideggerian discussion of how we live time at McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary*, 153.

6. Here, I am “adapting” a thought of Wittgenstein's, who wrote, in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge, 1961), 6.431 & 6.4311: “[I]n death... the world does not change, but ceases. // Death is not an event of life. Death is not lived through.”

7. To think that it *does*, is to take up a pernicious left-hemisphere stance that insists always on an extreme (parody of) “exactness.” For a saner vision of vagueness, see Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, sec. 71-88; or the 3rd of McGilchrist's 2016 Laing Lectures.

of adult life to assume, as I think we tend to do, that the latter moment is as utterly crucial, defining and beginning as we generally take it to be.

Birth is when life begins: Thus ipso facto it is not experienced. It is the *onset*, rather, of experiences.⁸

Thus one's earliest experiences in particular (that is, all the totality of one's experiences, i.e. one's life⁹) are not just a matter of minutes/days/months/years, let alone of dimensionless instants: they are, as one might best ("therapeutically"¹⁰) put it, everything. One helpful way to see the force of my argument thus far is to see that it is most misleading of all to think of ordinary time-sense as being potentially available to one newly-born. For such a one is (rather): experiencing an entire 'universe' of existence coming into being.¹¹

This helps us to see why it is not merely some kind of cognitive/psychological contingency that we do not have memories of the earliest parts of our life. Now: There may be good factive or quasi-factive cog.sci. explanations for why we lack such memories. But: I am suggesting that such explanations are "supererogatory"; for the argument I have made gives a reason that is already decisive. Something (i.e. experience) non-finite unfolding *out of nothing*: this cannot *closely* resemble our lives once we grasp and so long as we live the "ordinary" nature of time: for it is incompatible with it. For... how could we have such memories, given (as we might put it) life's startlingly *generative* nature, at and close to its onset:¹² something from nothing. Life *qua* experience is creation *ex nihilo*.

8. As already suggested above, this implies that "birth" in this sense may well occur well before one's emergence from the womb into the shared world, and I suggest that we ought to *accept* this, i.e. accept the reality of pre-natal life, pre-natal *being*. (This suggests a reason why concerns about late-term abortions should not be pigeon-holed as objectionable right-wing ideology. A properly feminist outlook on a woman's legal "right to choose," which I would broadly endorse, should not become a catch-all excuse for inflicting pain or obliteration on a *being*.)

9. And in fact this point turns out to be available, potentially, at ANY point in that life. Cf. also n.11, below.

10. In Wittgenstein's sense of this term: see e.g. *Philosophical Investigations*, 133.

11. I would want to suggest, as many Buddhists have suggested, that the withdrawal from ordinary time-sense back to a sense of immediacy and of startling "growth" in one's experience-base is in a certain sense always available to one. (This point appears to contradict points I have already made, above, but does not really do so: I am not literally claiming that one can go back to experiencing in the very way that one did as a new-born! (The occurrences of the term "sense" in the present note need to be noted.) But, metaphorically, I *am* claiming this or something like it.)

12. In this regard, my argument bears a resemblance to Ernest Schachtel's: See e.g. his "On memory and childhood amnesia," <http://www.unz.org/Pub/Politics-1948q1-00128>. For a similar reason one cannot experience the onset of a dream (See n. 27, below, and *supra*). This "cannot" is logical, not merely psychological.

A broadly similar point can be made about the onset of sleep. Experiencing it is not literally compossible with its actually occurring, except perhaps under extreme circumstances of duress (e.g. under the influence of certain powerful anaesthetic drugs: and even then, the logical point remains intact. There is no such thing as experiencing the very cessation of consciousness itself. The idea of experiencing the cessation of experience is self-defeating.). Falling asleep demands to be non-experienced. It has to be allowed; it cannot be forced, cannot be consciously undertaken. This, after all, is why Wittgenstein liked to compare the activity of *philosophy*, properly understood (i.e. as an activity that is, in McGilchrist's terms, right-hemisphere-*led* throughout), with falling asleep. It is a remarkably counter-intuitive analogy: *until* one sees the point being made here. (It is an analogy which seems crazy, to the left hemisphere by itself. But what this actually tells us is: that the left hemisphere by itself is crazy.)

We are accustomed to thinking of our lives and ourselves as finite, and in many contexts this can be an important reminder, a way to prevent ourselves from slipping into fantasies of immortality, of omnipotence, of interminable growth,¹³ etc. . But what, I believe, understanding and drawing out the ultimate implications of the kind of thinking that McGilchrist and Wittgenstein engage in can make available to us is what I myself am setting out in the present essay: namely, a non-supernaturalistic sense in which, equally (if not more so), and equally crucially, *our lives are not finite*, and thus in which we are not well described if we are described only as finite beings.

“Equally crucially”—for, becoming clear about a real sense in which we are not well described as finite can help us in a number of ways: above all, it can help us escape the confines of a conventionally-theologically defined existence, in which we are permanently and radically *inferior* to God. In which, that is, we measure ourselves (sacreligiously) *on the same scale* as God.

Not incidentally, contemporary atheism still exists mainly within the confines of just such an existence—only, now with the figure of God simply eliminated, which leaves us with an unavoidable lingering sense of inferiority (and intolerable frustrati-

13. I have in mind for instance the kinds of fantasies that made up the work of Julian Simon: <http://www.economist.com/node/604696>. But such fantasies are in fact extremely widespread. They are, unfortunately, hegemonic.

on: if only we were gods!: So we act as if we *are*, now imagining for instance that we can “engineer” the entire planet, or the entire genome), but without our even having the blessing of there being a Being who we are inferior *to*... The real “god delusion” is the delusion that we *are* (or at least, *ought* to be) gods.

Coming to sense ourselves as not merely finite beings is a necessary (though not sufficient!) condition, I would argue, for us finding ourselves and our lives through and through complete, and wonderful, and full. Such that we no longer suffer from god-envy.

An actually-infinite God, ironically, would not be ontologically different enough¹⁴ from the universe and its beings.¹⁵ From things. And God is no thing.¹⁶ And: From beings. And God is no super-being. God as potential-infinity is closer to the mark. God is something like *potentia*. *Omni potentia*... God, we might now say, *is becoming*.¹⁷

An image of this that makes some real sense, in its ever-changingness and in the *telos* of that change, is: life. Becoming is *exemplified* in our world by *life*.

So in the end this work (that the likes of McGilchrist and I are engaged in) is about defending life against death.¹⁸ Or better: about defending life against the dreadful kind of absence of vitality that one finds in much schizophrenia, in much Modern Art, in some science, in most Analytical Philosophy, in most economics...

God is life. Not the sum of beings. But life *itself*.

Life *versus* a kind of listless or lifeless deathlessness, or death-in-life, or the complete absence of vitality: there is the real opposition, the real stakes in the ongoing struggle against the blundering quest of the left hemisphere to suborn the right.

14. The point generalises: The left hemisphere way is not to make different enough. The right hemisphere understands wholes, it unifies; but it doesn't do so falsely. It is open *to profound difference*. The left hemisphere aggressively *differentiates*, dichotomises, but *without* registering what Heidegger calls *ontological* difference. Cf. also n. 2, above.

15. Cf. Jean-Luc Nancy's useful remark at the close of his “God, Charlie, No One,” trans. Gianmaria Senia, *Psychoanalysis* (2016), <http://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/god-charlie-no-one-2/>: “The “infinite” is not something enormous or unattainable. It is simply not stopping at anything determined, fixed, identified and named with a presumably proper name.”

16. Rowan Williams has recently been making this clear, in various talks. Cf. also the argument made by Mark Johnston in his *Saving God* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

17. This latter thought is explored expertly by McGilchrist in Lecture 3 of his Laing Lectures.

18. Holderlin understood what we are defending life against, because he had the great misfortune, impossibly, to experience its opposite... (See Louis Sass, *Madness and Modernism* (New York: Basic, 1992), 310, where he quotes from one of Holderlin's letters, thus: “a wondrous horror...overcomes me, and silently I remind myself of the terrible truth: a living corpse!”)

This is perhaps why some of the best musings on immortality *when that immortality is conceived of as endlessly prolonged life* successfully characterise it as a kind of death-in-life, an absence of life.¹⁹

My line of thinking in this segment of the text may help to explain the profound spiritual and intellectual power today of pantheism and (especially) of panentheism, which improves upon pantheism by keeping a sense of God as transcendent, as always more, always becoming.²⁰ Life is sacred, and is always becoming. Everything is sacred, for all things are tied together, and God is in all things and (especially) in all living things, and (*especially*) in all beings.²¹ I believe that panentheism will be the basis of religion in the age which we are now entering,²² if that age is not to eliminate human civilisation: for panentheism profoundly centres the importance of *potentia*, of becoming, of life.

We (all beings, even all living things) are made in God's image: we are non-finite, we are always becoming. God then is the very *essence* of what we are. In both senses of this phrase (both with the "is" being the sign of equality, *and* with it being the copula): God IS Becoming. Self-unfolding potential in all its grandness. But that of course means that God cannot be pinned down; God is always more than we know (and thus one must be intensely aware of the necessary limits of the kind of enterprise that I am engaged in right now, and of what I keep implicitly or explicitly circling

19. I find this done very well in some mythic children's stories of our time. *Dr. Who* has managed to do this successfully, once or twice (most notably perhaps, at the end of "The Five Doctors"). So does Garth Nix, I believe, in his fine trilogy, *The Old Kingdom*. Part of the wonderful conceit of this trilogy is that it poses an heroic alternative to necromancy. An "abhorsen," in NIX's novels, is one who sends the dead to death, rather than allowing them to seek prolongation of life. Something similar is going on in Ursula le Guin's marvellous *The Farthest Shore*, the culmination of the *Earthsea* trilogy. And in the trajectory of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, as it moves to liberate the dead from their undying pointless existence. And of course there is a connection here with *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. In Gollum, and in all who come into contact with the Ring. (Compare also of course Bernard Williams's classic presentation of the boredom of unending temporal existence, "The Makropoulos Case" in his *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).)

20. For some detail, see Jay Michaelson, "The Meaning of Avatar: Everything is God (A Response to Ross Douthat and Other Naysayers of 'Pantheism')," *Huffington Post*, 22 Dec. 2009, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jay-michaelson/the-meaning-of-avatar-eve_b_400912.html. (Thanks to Iain McGilchrist also, for vital discussion on this point.)

21. This is why Quakers, such as me, speak of "that of God in everyone." (I would include other beings besides humans in this "everyone." However, I restrict the term 'beings' to those creatures that have some *open-endedness* in their openness to their environment. Some capacity for learning in its true sense, the germ of (potential for) culture and moral evaluation. Thus dogs or crows or pigs or seals or octopi are certainly beings, but ticks and trees are presumably not. Of course, all life, beings and non-beings alike, is linked in a web, and forms a kind of marvellous dialectical whole, a whole also incorporating much that is not alive, such as the rocks of the planet itself.)

22. See <https://medium.com/@GreenRupertRead/religion-after-the-death-of-god-the-rise-of-pantheism-and-the-return-to-the-source-54453788bbaa>.

back to, in the present paper: the crucial role and nature of metaphoricity, a metaphoricity that is not merely disposable, not transitive.). God is not a thing that happens to be unsayable whose character can nevertheless *somehow* be said. To say: “If God could be spoken, *this* would be ‘His’ form: _____,” is never adequate, never sensical. God’s word or will is not a sense-like object that just happens to be hidden from our powers of meaning. The dire hazard of postulating God as ‘actual’ rather than ‘potential’ is that it gives one the (once more, sacreligious) illusion of being able to name, fully know and encompass God. This has been the bane of much theology and of much belief, especially literalistic/fundamentalistic strands.

As I mentioned near the start of this essay (in setting out how my line of thought flies in the face of conventional “wisdom”), an obstacle to understanding all this is the following: in general, “potential” means something like “conceptual but not (yet) real/realized,” whereas “actual” means “achieved, finished, real.” Whereas what McGilchrist’s book (by contrast) enables us to realise is that reality (i.e. the deep nature of all “things”²³) is always potential *as well as* actual; and that the actual, *if* staccatoed or frozen from that flow of becoming/potential, is *merely* actual, merely a closed fragment.

Reality is both (*t*)*here* and ever *open-ended*. All things that are real are potential, *becoming*; and the ‘actual’ (without this) is then merely a re-presentation that lacks the properties of the properly real. This makes the terms “actual” and “potential” *as they are used by left-hemisphere-dominated philosophical / scientific etc.* thinking very confusing, basically reversed in their valence from how they ought to be. (But until one recognises that confusion, and mentally (and societally!) sorts it out, it will superficially appear as if it is the kind of thinking that *I* am engaged in here that is confused.)²⁴

So we need to turn these terms around, as I have sought to do thus far in this piece. We need to come to see potential as “greater” than—realer, if you will, than—actual... To focus on the actual WITHOUT presencing (its) potential is death(-in-life)

23. The scare-quote here is advised; because an implication of the line of thought I am exploring in this essay, explored at vast length in McGilchrist’s most recent work, is that, as that word puts it, there is something *The Matter With Things* (London: Perspectiva Press, 2021). Following Bergson and Whitehead, the very (left-hemisphere) conception of things is awry. It’s not just that God is no thing; *things* [even medium-sized dry objects] too are not what the concept “thing” has us believe of them...

24. My thinking in this paragraph is directly owed to correspondence with McGilchrist.

—and that is what the left-hemisphere does. The rhetoric of philosophers thus typically makes it appear as though actual is superior to potential. Whereas actually (See how high the tides of language run here!), actual *is a kind of frozen, unalive version of potential*.

Infinity in its true sense is nothing but endlessness in the only sense in which this can be realised: there can always be more. (Numerically, which is our paradigm case: there can always be one more. You can always add one. There is no largest-number-of-all.) Thus I've pointed up here how life is not finite. Indeed, one can radicalise this thought, as Wittgenstein does in the closing pages of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.²⁵ A *moment* (phenomenologically speaking)—the present—is endless because it has no frontier: there can always be more (of it). It is an open whole, not-incomplete.²⁶ It is in this sense non-finite.

And more moments: that's life; that's (of course) essential to what it is to be alive, that there can²⁷ be more moments. Life is end-less, like a dream.²⁸ Life is a whole “composed” of wholes.²⁹

Life is not however just more moments for the sake of it. Life is the potential of being (not the mere having/consuming of experiences). Life is becoming. Insofar as our longing for the infinite is authentic in the sense I've outlined, one might say, then we are not finite. The infinite is in this sense *in the finite*. Life has (or should have) meaning, even from the start.

For, while we might characterise the actual quite simply as finite, still the potential is infinite; and potential is what life *is*. The potential becomes—reduces to—the actual once its living potency is exhausted.

25. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge, 1961).

26. This may account for the deep phenomenon of what some have called intimations of immortality, as for instance in Romanticism (thanks to Ian Christie for this point). I am insisting in the present piece that it is a complete mistake to think of immortality as endless temporal “duration.” But immortality in/as true dwelling in the non-finite present moment: that is something one can have intimations of. And indeed: more than merely intimations.

27. So far as one is subjectively concerned. Of course, and as I have already (and mundanely) admitted, sometimes (i.e. in some cases at what turns out to be the very end of one's life) it will turn out that this “can” is delusive. The “can” here is necessarily, vitally, felt, not necessarily objective.

28. This point is explored and explicated brilliantly in Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010): see particularly the sequences in the dream-Paris with Cobb and Ariadne. (It is important however to note that this striking respect in which life is like a dream is absolutely not the respect supposed by Descartes! The point I make in the text here is in no way conducive to scepticism or solipsism. On the contrary: it brings us into close attunement with life, with reality, with others.)

29. On which, see the first shloka of the *Ishavasya Upanishad*, <http://www.swamij.com/upanishad-isha-purna.htm>.

When it's authentic, the actual manifests the signs of the infinite from which, as it were, it was born.

It's essential to life, as it is to a dream, that its start and end are not experienced, and that in this way it is both startless (a word which I believe we should familiarise ourselves with) and endless. (It is not a counter-example to this to point up that one sometimes does get to experience the end of a dream, seemingly: through becoming lucid, or through waking up/being rudely woken up. These are not in the relevant sense experiences of the dream ending: they are rather *ruptures* to the dream. They no longer subsist in the space of dream-consciousness. (This implies, as we might put it, that a "lucid dream" both is and is not a dream. It is like dreams but also like "day-dreams" or even imaginations, which may in most cases properly be said to have beginnings and ends.) This accounts by the way for why one cannot die in a dream: for genuinely dying in a dream (as opposed to living through death) would run counter to the logic laid out here.)

At life's very beginning (and I mean here, as explicated earlier: psychological life), one doesn't have anything like: "Oh, I'm conscious! *Ergo sum!*" One has rather the onset of something. Both that onset and that 'thing' are only available to consciousness later, *in media res*. Similarly, at death, which is the reverse process (sunset rather than onset, as it were), a process usually (though not always) rather telescoped, one still does not have "OK, that's it. No more moments at all. Consciousness ends *here*." You do not get to experience the *here* here, if it is meant to be the instant of consciousness ceasing. There is no such thing as experiencing a/the "There cannot be any more moments/any more of this moment" moment. (Again, this is a constitutive point, a logical point, that has been available to us since Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, as I will shortly set out.)

Extraordinary as it might sound, then, both life *and (even) each moment in life* have a better claim to be understood as infinite (or at least: non-finite, or not simply finite) than do the trans-finites, considered as numbers. A completed—actual—infinite is a contradiction in terms. It fails to embody the character of openness, of 'there can always be more', of what Wittgenstein called the "unendliche Möglichkeit" that IS what we (can successfully) mean by "infinity." A life, or a moment, or a view (I mean: a visual impression in its true, full sense), or linguistic meaning: these

have a better claim to be taken as non-finite — as not captured by the idea of finitude, of actuality with a dimension and an end — than the “transfinites” do, considered as numbers. The central delusion of “infinity” has been, of course: it’s being taken to be a number.

We delude ourselves by thinking of infinity as if it were a thing, or an object (such as a number). Infinity is best thought-of, rather, as a negative: It is the un-finite. Where what is finite is *defined*: as numbers are defined. “Infinity” simply is the potential for new numbers beyond a set of numbers mentioned. The delusion we fall into when we think of ourselves as finite is to think that what it is for us ourselves to be finite is defined. Whereas actually what we know is life: and that has roughly the same kind of openness as 1,2,3,4..., where the ellipsis is *not* parsed as an abbreviation.

This helps us understand why endless life is not what we usually think it is. ‘Endless temporal duration’, properly understood, is not a temporal duration. (Rather, it’s a fantasm: it’s the fantasy, the delusion, of “actual infinity” allegedly-realised temporally.) “Endless temporal duration” is not a *period of time*. (See on this Wittgenstein’s *TLP* 6.431 & 6.4311 & 6.4312: “If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, then he lives eternally who lives in the present.// Our life is endless in the way that our visual field is without limit.”) To think that it is to make the same kind of deep delusive error as is present in thinking of infinity as a number. Infinity is no more a number than eternity is a length of time. To see this, it can be helpful to bear in mind that God does not “live forever.” God’s eternity is not a matter of simply stretching an ordinary “finite” life back and forward so far that it has no beginning or end (which is how the left-hemisphere would picture immortality). Understanding why requires, again, that one overcomes the crude dogma of thinking of God as a super-person, and requires one to exit any crudely literalist or fundamentalist form of theology.³⁰

One who truly lives in the present lives well in infinity, in eternity, because, as we might risk putting it, they live in a *flow* of infinities (better: of non-finites). They live in the flow of the great non-finite (of) life—which is necessarily “assembled” from non-finite “components.” (Notably, as McGilchrist reminds us, such a sense of flow is impossible for many sufferers of right-hemisphere strokes etc. The left hemisphere

30. Such exit is implicit in McGilchrist’s work: cf. especially Lecture 3 of his Laing Lectures.

seems incapable of sustaining such a sense, and instead tries, hopelessly, to reduce time to points and then to reassemble life from that.³¹)

For: There simply is no such thing as assembling something infinite from finite components. To think that there *is* such a thing is to fail to understand the “categorical” gulf between the finite and the infinite, and other similarly profound categorical gulfs.

It is to fail to make different enough.

Now: It’s generally *easier* for an old person than for a young adult to master the practice of in this sense living in the present, and not falling into comparison; for it is easier for a young person to get caught up by the vastness of their summers, etc., and not to remember that they will die. Not to be mindful of each moment, each moment that is or can be (as) a lifetime, a totality that can be wonderfully without beginning or end as experienced.³²

It will nevertheless probably be objected to my entire line of argument that I seem to be denying the most elementary of truths: that, as it is most often put, we are finite beings who live finite lives. This point seems essential to the thinking of some of our greatest recent thinkers, such as Cavell, who again and again in his thought emphasises our “finitude.” Of course, *in the sense in which this point is happily and helpfully intended* I don’t deny it for a moment; indeed, on the contrary, I think its tacit (or indeed explicit) denial one of the more disastrous features of the age we live in, an age that childishly resists *all* sense of limits and fantasises endless growth³³ and even fantasises biological immortality as desirable.³⁴ And yet...: there *is* a *sense* in which I do deny it, too... From without, we can be said to live finite lives, with a beginning and an end. And indeed, as Heidegger (cf. his concept of “Being-toward-death”) and many others have rightly argued, one key to understanding life is to understand that—as we can see when we see people dying, etc.; and we ought to see them, and *be with* them—it has an end. And it’s been crucial to my argument that life in an

31. This procedure closely resembles the hopeless effort to literally compose lines from points, an effort dissected by Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein’s Lectures: Cambridge 1930-2* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 1980), 108.

32. In this sense, life actually is like a dream: as explored and explicated brilliantly in Christopher Nolan’s film *Inception* (Cf. n.27 above, and *supra*). We can see better now why it is essential to life—as it is to a dream—that its start and end are, as I have set out, not experienced, and that in this way it is endless. (This point is also present in Buddhism, especially in and around the Zen tradition; for instance, in Thich Nhat Hanh’s work.)

33 Cf. n.13, above, and *supra*.

34. See e.g. <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/russian-scientist-injects-himself-ancient-immortality-bacteria-1522150>.

obvious sense has a beginning (i.e. that we are born). *But* our lives as lived, I submit, are nevertheless not finite. Just as the bounds of sense (and the space of reasons) are not finite.³⁵ It only makes sense to claim that these are finite if one can somehow position oneself outside them. But this is just what it makes no *sense* to do. There is no such thing as doing other than *describing* them from within, in roughly the following sense: life means nothing except as understood already in terms of life;³⁶ and the same holds of meaning. Imaginations outside life—and outside meaning—are in this sense only: *delusions* of sense.³⁷

One might put it in the following way. That this way of putting the matter is “paradoxical” should not prevent us from risking contemplating it: We are finite beings; *and* we are not finite beings.³⁸ It is too weak, actually, merely to say “In one sense we are, and in another sense we are not.” Lived from within, we *are*; viewed from without, we are *not*. And a complete view of ourselves needs to take in both of these (radically discrepant) perspectives/truths. (We need to embrace the incommensurable left- and right- hemisphere perspectives; without reducing one to the other.)

A less paradoxical way to express these truths might be (and I leave it to the reader to decide whether or not it is better hereabouts to seek to be less paradoxical!): We are as such *neither* finite *nor* infinite: the blunt dichotomy doesn't hook up well with the very nature of our lives.

We crudely think we are only finite beings because we have not thought through the sense, just outlined, in which we can be said to be not finite beings; and/or because we have rashly assumed that it makes sense to contrast ourselves to alleged infinite (super-)beings: beings that “live forever,” that are “infinitely powerful,” etc.: thus it is that I've shown that and how we remain (in this sense) in thrall to the very questionable³⁹ assumption that a literal theology can be meaningfully contrasted with our own existence. (The bald claim that “We are (only) finite beings” is a particular

35. See on this the argument of Alice Crazy and Rupert Read, eds., *The New Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 2000).

36. Sartre's concept of the *pour-soi* is close to this point. John Foster (personal correspondence) calls this “radical insideness”: most things *except* life have an inside only relative to their contemplation from outside, but life as reflexive consciousness exists inherently from inside itself.

37. They can of course be very marvellous and indeed instructive delusions: great films and artworks often consist of just such.

38. The situation is parallel to that outlined by Shunryu Suzuki, “Ordinary Mind, Buddha Mind,” in his *Not Always So: Practicing the True Spirit of Zen* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 58-59, wherein he argues that one is Buddha, and an ordinary man.

39. Questionable, I have suggested, both “metaphysically” and morally.

religious claim, not a *factive* claim. In this regard, many of the “hardest-headed” contemporary “atheistic,” etc. thinkers are, irony of ironies, unconsciously in thrall to a theological religion. I say this not by way of belittling religion in general—nothing, as I hope is self-evident from this paper thus far, could be further from my intentions—but rather to start recontextualise the claim that “We are finite beings” back into its *proper* setting, and to problematise any over-interpretation or imperial interpretation—i.e. an interpretation excluding other interpretations—of it.)

The blanket assertion of our finitude, I think, makes it *harder*, ironically, for us to accept the ecological limits to growth;⁴⁰ and the limits to life (mortality): for we suppose tacitly (and absurdly) that we could be or could have been gods, and/or that our embodiment is essentially a limitation/an accident, etc. Now: It can make of course perfect sense to say “I know my limits,” perhaps in a conversation with one’s doctor or one’s spouse; or to say “I guess I’ve reached my limit,” when one reaches (say) a weight that one simply cannot lift. But it *doesn’t make sense* to say “I’m limited,” or “I’m finite” apropos of nothing, or apropos of everything. (That’s why I suggest that baldly to state such things, if it is successfully a claim at all, is at best a particular kind of religious one. To speak in the abstract of ‘our finitude’ is in the end to speak in a way that fails us, philosophically.) To think that it *does* make sense to assert one’s finitude as a metaphysical truth is to fall into precisely the mythic error examined at great length by Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*.

This point is quite general, about any bald/general claim that we are limited/finite. Additionally I have made, above, a more specific point, a point about “universes”: the universe of sense, the universe of one’s life, and the universe. Wholes that are “complete,” without in the relevant sense it making sense for there to be anything *outside* of them (When they expand they don’t expand *into* anything (else)). In *these* cases, it’s not only that it doesn’t make sense to make a bald decontextualised claim of finitude; it’s that in the end it can make *better* sense to make a claim of *non-finitu-*

40. Because, as John Foster argues (in his *After Sustainability* (London: Routledge, 2014)), we have lost in urban-mechanical living and in the takeover of the Earth by industrialism (on which, see especially the brilliant and disturbing end of Chapter 11 of McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary*) the only kind of real contact with our infinitude-in-finitude which we can have (namely: the wild as intimately-inhabited metaphor for our whole selves). And so we now react to our increasingly recognised ecological finitude, disastrously, *as if it were a challenge to be overcome*, rather than as a vital condition of free creative being (Cf. Giorgos Kallis’s 2016 lecture “Limits Without Scarcity: Why Malthus Was Wrong,” <https://youtu.be/ENZXoxjoeSg>; he sees Castoriadis as offering the best route to seeing how limits condition our autonomy and creativity.)

de.⁴¹ And that is another way of saying: we need here to give the greatest weight, in the end, to the right-hemisphere perspective on these matters...

*

What this paper seeks to describe is very difficult actually to *describe*; that is an *inevitable* feature of it. Thus some of my strange formulations, occasional neologisms, the circling progress of my writing here.⁴² The difficulties are the difficulties of the true paradoxes one sometimes encounters in life, paradoxes that one cannot, *contra* much philosophical 'wisdom', simply dissolve.⁴³ Indeed, the difficulties here are structurally *the very same* as and that Wittgenstein endeavoured to describe throughout his life (see e.g. the Preface of the *Tractatus*, and *Philosophical Investigations* sections 103, 240-242 and 499-502).⁴⁴ They are also the difficulties that McGilchrist is wrestling with in his work.

One of the ways in which *The Master and His Emissary* helps us in that McGilchrist has of course a kind of *account* of these difficulties. His metaphors of the left and right hemispheres can make more perspicuous to us to how paradoxes which seem catastrophic to thought (from a solely left-hemisphere perspective) can be reckoned with and indeed relaxed through (once one shifts to the right hemisphere). Let us consider for a moment an example quite pertinent to our case in the present essay:

Take the sorites paradox. This results from believing that the whole is the sum of the parts, and can be reached by a sequential process of incrementation. It tries to relate two *things*: a grain of sand and a heap [...]. It also presupposes that there must either be a heap or not be a heap at any one time: "either/or"

41. For how it can be *possible* for us to be finite *and* yet not to be finite - for how these two things can be true even if they contradict one another—see again McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary*, 97-8 and 137-140, especially his discussions of the nature of paradox in relation to the two hemispheres. See also the discussion immediately below.

42. Thus my style, at times, rhymes with Wittgenstein's.

43. For why, see *ibid.*, 200, which recovers Romanticism's recovery of the vitality and ineradicability of paradox.

44. The philosophically-well-read and attentive reader will recognise the latter half of the present essay as shot through with thoroughly "New Wittgensteinian" ("resolute") thinking, thinking for which these cited passages from Wittgenstein are especially iconic.

are your only alternatives. That is the left hemisphere view and sure enough it leads to paradox. According to the right-hemisphere view, it is a matter of shift in context, and the coming into being of a *Gestalt*, an entity which has imprecisely defined bounds, and is recognised whole: the heap comes into being gradually, and is a process, an evolving, changing “thing.” Failure to take into account context, inability to understand Gestalt forms, an inappropriate demand for precision where none can be found, an ignorance of process, which becomes a never-ending series of static moments: these are signs of left-hemisphere predominance.⁴⁵

Note the scare-quotes that McGilchrist uses around the term “thing,”⁴⁶ when it occurs under the auspices of the right hemisphere. And especially, notice the nature of a heap as an open-ended whole. There is a direct kinship here (I don’t want to overstate it, but it is worth dwelling on for a moment) with the argument of the present piece. The idea that one can understand life as a finite object composed of something like seconds is akin to the idea that one can understand a heap as literally and exhaustively composed of grains. Of course, a heap *is* composed of grains—take away the grains, and there would be no heap (similarly: a life of no seconds duration is no life)—but the mistake is to think that there is no qualitative difference between grains and a heap. A heap is a whole. Formed by a process that in advance has no limit. One can always add one more. But that doesn’t imply that one can always take away one more. A heap is open-ended. It is not very well understood as an object, a thing. It has vague boundaries. It is a little like a life.

I don’t want to pretend that saying the kinds of things I’ve said above solve everything or makes everything magically perspicuous. On the contrary: I’ve explicitly noted that the difficulties one encounters hereabouts are coincident with the limits of sense, and with the difficulties in describing those limits. But the limits of sense have usually been wrongly imagined as an area outside which there is a banned inef-fable or somehow substantial area. No; there is nothing outside the limits of sense, not even a “vacuum,” just as there is not a vacuum outside the universe.

45. McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary*, 138-39.

46. On this point, McGilchrist’s more recent work is more explicit: see n. 22 above.

This most certainly does not mean that we are entitled to dogmatically insist that there are no feelings that cannot be put into words, nor that ordinary language must (be able to) capture without residue every reality that there is. What it means is just that we must avoid tacitly (or indeed explicitly!) positing that there are senses or sense-like things outside the bounds of sense. And that we must avoid positing the bounds of sense as something that we can peer over or demarcate from both sides (Thus Wittgenstein's important remark: "In so far as people think they can see the "limits of human understanding," they believe of course that they can see beyond these."⁴⁷). And, therefore, that we must consider the bounds of sense as like the edge of the universe, or the edge of the visual field. The word "bounds" or "edge" is being used here, inevitably, in a "non-standard," transitional sense: in that, normally, but *not* in these cases, when one can describe the edge of something one can point to or describe what lies on the *other* side of the edge, too.

The limits in question here are not then limits dividing any *this* from any *that*. Rather, they divide what *is* from *nothing*; truly a nothing, that can only masquerade as or (better) be fantasised as a something. It is of course to fall into a disastrous fallacy of misplaced concreteness to think that the universe begins with one's life and ends with one's death. It is an awesomely tragic failure of imagination and humanity thus to be unable to take seriously the lives of others (That disaster, we call "solipsism"; and it is present of course in some philosophy as well as in some psychopathology); but it is unavoidably, conceptually-certainly the case that there is (in an obvious and important sense that I am meaning to index and to characterise in the present paper) nothing of one's *own* life before one's birth or after one's death. This is a tautology that nevertheless shows us something, "transitionally," and relative to various possible and actual confusions and delusions. One's own life is a whole entire unto itself. It is not bounded, as experienced. Any experienced life is in this sense, I have shown here, not finite. It means nothing to actually touch or experience, let alone to exceed, its horizons: one does not experience one's birth or one's death. *Life is in this way end-less.*

47. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. Von Heikki Nyman (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 15.

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Stanley Cavell counterposes skepticism to finitude. He shows how we yearn to escape what he calls our “finitude,” and that this yearning is inevitable but deeply problematic. My argument by contrast has been that the very assertion of finitude is itself all-too-complicit with what Cavell calls skepticism. To actually overcome the dialectic between the two, *one needs to question the “finitude” wing of it just as much as the “skepticism” wing.*

Cavell is rightly discontented with skepticism. And he shows beautifully throughout his work how skepticism is discontented with our lives as they are. With, as I say, what he calls our “finitude.” But I am showing here how (t)his way of being discontented with skepticism stays too close to its orbit.

So I have in this paper been questioning the assumption/assertion that humans are finite. The “finite vs. infinite” distinction has its home in maths. That’s what it was best designed for. It ill-fits the universe, physicality and spatiality. It especially ill-fits us: i.e. we (thinking, struggling, learning, questing, loving beings) are not at all well-described if we are described (only) as finite. For, the question one ought to ask whenever someone says that something is finite, is: *As opposed to what?* A number is finite, as opposed to the endless *possibility* of adding one to it, and generating new numbers as a result. But if we say that our *life* is (simply and only) finite, we have to countenance far more dubious (pseudo-)“possibilities,” of endless temporal duration. And/or we have to contrast ourselves unfavourably to alleged super-beings, (which turn out to be) utterly puffed up versions of ourselves. Assuming or asserting our finitude turns out to be a way of (hopelessly and dangerously) keeping us in the same game as gods, rather than, as one might superficially have thought, enabling us to overcome that game.

Rather, we should notice (and celebrate) that our life as lived *consists* of the endless possibility of adding to it. Life essentially involves the open-endedness of moment-after-moment being/becoming. Flow. What Bergson called “creative evolution.”

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I have made a difficult argument here. It would be relatively easy, in my view, to illustrate a sort of non-finitude in our inter-temporal nature: that is, in our being beings who essentially have children. I argue elsewhere ⁴⁸ that our deepest care—that for our descendants—ramifies thereby into a permanent care for the future of just as profound a depth. For it iterates without end.

This non-finitude is enriched once one appreciates also an end-less-ness in our inter-personal nature. That is, in our being beings who essentially live in communities, beings who *essentially* are first-person *plural*,⁴⁹ and indeed whose communities stretch out to include (or at least to touch and be touched by) non-human animals and in a sense the whole of life and of ecology, including the Sun and more. I've argued previously that Wittgenstein provides resources for coming to understand that and how we are such beings,⁵⁰ and how important this is in relation to giving us a sound sense of (supra-personal) "self" as we find ourselves in relation to the great struggle of this century: the political and eco-logical struggle to stop us from utterly destroying our civilisation and our planetary home.

I have sought here to go further: to show a vital non-finitude even in our own individual lives (and even: in the *moments* of those lives, in our living in the present, moment after moment). If my argument has been successful then it will have serious consequences for the many, diverse "mainstream"—hegemonic—authors, institutions and discourses which, implicitly or explicitly, suppose otherwise. It should shake up the complacencies of religious and 'anti-religious' thinkers alike, of "scientific" "common-sense," and of the philosophers, including top contemporary brains from Analytic metaphysics and philosophy of mind, and the great thinking of Cavell and Derrida.

My line of thought should help us to resist the siren voices that belittle us, and/or that urge us (absurdly, hubristically, disastrously) to leave behind our "finite" planet or species.

48. See my *Parents for a Future: How Loving Our Children Can Prevent Climate Collapse* (Norwich: UEA Publishing Project, 2021).

49. On this, see Andrew Norris's magnificent book, *Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

50. See especially ch. 10 of my *Wittgenstein's Liberatory Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2020).

*

Is there more to say about *why* it is so widely assumed that we are finite beings? I think the ultimate reason is a shared scientism that infects the likes of Derrida just as much as it does the likes of Dawkins or Dennett. A widely shared preconception that to say anything other than that we are finite necessarily courts a dangerously hubristic supernaturalism or superstition. I have shown, to the contrary, that the assumption of finitude *itself* reflects an undue complicity in traditional theology: a conception of God or gods too much as if superpeople with superpowers. To assert that this superperson(s) exists and to deny that they exist are just two sides of the same bad coin. To do either is to take part in the same game, a game far past its sell-by-date. When one embraces instead a conception of God *as potential itself*, and/or a conception of ourselves as endlessly becoming, then one is at last escaping the grip of the finite vs infinite dichotomy. As Wittgenstein taught, and as the greatest wisdom traditions have long held, we can stop pining for everlasting life—as literalist religious believers and “transhumanists” alike do—when we real-ise the power and presence that is possible, without limit, in simply being present. In becoming. Moment after moment.

Life as it is lived. Presence, always-changing; that is the great prize. Most of us live to very roughly three score years and ten (Though that risks shortening, if we don't get more serious about overcoming our mutually-reinforcing fantasies of being limited and being unlimited.). But we can live in eternity, if we stick to inhabiting fully the endless open door of now. (And if we do so, that will reduce the likelihood that we will trash this living planet so badly that we prematurely bring this adventure to an end.)

Where exactly, finally, then, does this *leave* us in relation to God? It certainly involves our leaving behind our sense of being comparable to and utterly inferior to God. It's misleading to describe God as actually-infinite, and misleading to describe us as merely-finite; there is no useful way of *comparing* us and God.

That sense persists in most Postmodernists *and* in Cavell *and in the dominant scientific worldview*, when they present us as finite. We have to move beyond faux-“humble” illusions of finitude, or silly illusions of infinitude. To compare us with God

is already to fall into the trap of assuming the ubiquity of commensurability. We need instead a thinking that is willing to teach and be taught differences. Especially, the profound difference between finite and infinite. Without rash assumptions as to how (if at all) that difference maps, beyond the mathematical.

Such thinking is challenging, and of course I don't claim that it can proceed without metaphor: what can? But the price of intellectual freedom⁵¹ is the exercising of eternal *vigilance* with regard to ones metaphors, rather than lapsing into dogmatism with regard to them.⁵²

51. Or, in Wittgenstein's sense, *liberation*: cf. for discussion and citation n.76 of Michael Kremer's "The cardinal problem of philosophy" (in Alice Crary, ed., *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007). Or again, in Kant's sense, which we "resolute"/"new" Wittgensteinians inherit and radicalise (including de-individualizing it): *autonomy*. For detail, see my *Wittgenstein's Liberatory Philosophy*.

52. The best metaphor I know, to help one in that enterprise of undying vigilance in the service of intellectual autonomy, is McGilchrist's, of *the master* and his *emissary*...

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Finally, I owe a great debt to my teacher, Stanley Cavell, with whom I discoursed about the matter of this paper across the years. It is an enduring sadness that he too was, of course, mortal.