

# Surfing Finitude

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## Infinite versus Finite

Alain Badiou makes some nice points about how the ideas of infinity and finitude shifted in the development of philosophical thought. In classical times, finitude was not the problem; infinity was the problem. The infinite is formless, horrid pathological chaos - a sort of opposite to existence. Even the Greek Gods were finite. They lived in time, in a particular place, and got involved in particular human events. Still, though it may not seem obvious to us, they were supposed to be, in some sense, perfect: they were the Immortals - so finite, immortal, perfect beings.

Finite things are limited and therefore they have a structure. Structure provides norms which individual things, instances of the structure, can realise or fail to realise. In relation to these norms something can be good or bad. Something is good if it is an adequate realisation of a particular form, i.e. of a set of what Badiou calls 'closed possibilities': for example, this particular piece of crockery makes a good cup, but a bad spade. Something is *perfect* if it is the ideal realisation of a finite nature. So something can be perfect, *only* if it is finite; its finitude makes perfection possible but it also makes its perfection absolute. Absolute perfection is not mysterious: it is possible, for example, to make an absolutely perfect score in snooker or darts; but not in soccer or cricket.

On this view, human beings are finite and they have natures which provide norms for living. However we are not very good at perfection. Badness, sometimes tragic badness, takes one of two forms: hubris i.e. going beyond one's limits; or deficiency, which is falling short of an adequate realisation of one's particular nature. Likewise there are two forms of goodness: keeping to one's place, on the one hand; and on the other, self-realisation or self-fulfilment.

In contrast to the classical story, Badiou characterises the Christian or Romantic period in which the finite becomes the problem. This is a result of the fusion of Greek and Judaic thought and the push to monotheism. The One and Only God becomes infinite. God no longer occupies space and time; he becomes transcendent. Transcendence requires a complete division between the finite and infinite realms - they become incommensurable. God is not a being alongside other beings; he becomes *Ipsum Esse*, Being itself; he is not the realisation of a type of being because he has no limits. So God cannot be hubristic. He is perfect - '*a being than which no greater being can be conceived*' as Anselm's

argument puts it. And now perfection demands infinity. As Aquinas says, the best name for God is *He who is* because it denominates the [infinite ocean of substance](#).<sup>i</sup>

Once the Infinite not only becomes real, but the most real existence a new problem arises: how does the finite relate to the Infinite? Why should the Infinite care for the finite? What can the finite do to reach out to or make an impact on the Infinite? In religious language, how does God relate to man and man to God? What we insist on calling the proofs for the existence of God, what Aquinas calls the Five Ways, are tracks along which a finite mind reaches out to a being it cannot comprehend.

The gulf between Infinite and finite gives rise to a religious need for transactions between the two realms. In Christian terms, Jesus is the mediator, the bridge between God and man. The Incarnation and Redemption are the miraculous interventions of a caring God. The finite, for its part, can *only* aspire and yearn; but it *can* aspire and yearn; in fact it *must* aspire and yearn: as St Augustine says when he addresses God in the first sentence of his *Confessions*, (*fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te*), *you made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you*. In the new dispensation hubris becomes a requirement: finite human beings must aspire to the transcendent; we are pathetic creatures who have a supernatural destiny.

So much for medieval theology, I hear you say. But I want to borrow one more of Badiou's insights. He argues that Romanticism and Modern Philosophy have inherited, in secular form, similar problems. The infinite God and miraculous mediations may have disappeared but the Infinite continues to haunt the Enlightenment and Romantic cultures. Aspiration and yearning, '*to look out upon distant seas*', are part of the romantic vision. Epitomising the difference between the classical and the romantic ideas of infinity, Badiou suggests that sculpture and architecture are the principal Classical arts; whereas poetry and music became the paradigm Romantic arts.

## Cognitive Finitude

Even as it encourages the rise of secularism, Enlightenment philosophy continued to find finitude a problem. In particular it struggled when it tried to anchor knowledge, values and existence itself in finitude - the three areas where I said this morning the Void opens up.

In Cartesian philosophy we yearn for absolute knowledge but we realise that finitude is incompatible with certainty. Science, knowledge proper, is impossible for a finite mind. It is not possible to be certain of anything in a world in which a superior being calls all the shots. That is what the Malignant Demon argument sets out to show. It true that the *Cogito* survives even the Demon. But in the *Cogito* we achieve only a finite, absolute certainty in a momentary intellectual intuition, an isolated, evanescent perfection - a single light bulb flickering unreliably in a pitch black cellar, illuminating nothing.

The *Cogito* is an absolute finite certainty but it cannot be stretched over time, between different minds and across cultures. It is an unstable state of mind for a temporal creature. Descartes appeals to divine veracity to turn these isolated moments of individual certainty into bodies of communicable knowledge to make science possible for finite minds. This is the move that Hume criticised as *an unexpected circuit*. It is understandable that Hume, striving to become a radical empiricist and proto-Positivist, should disdain Descartes' transcendental move. But he is wrong to think it unexpected: an orientation to the divine was built into the Cartesian ideal of knowledge from the start. The philosopher's quest for stable knowledge demands a *divine* mind. A Benign Demon won't do. A being more powerful than us - but finite - won't do. Our knowledge would rely on his say so. And besides, his knowledge would be vulnerable to an argument based on the supposition of an even more Malignant Demon.

Nothing short of divine veracity as a feature of the perfect knowledge of a perfect creature can underwrite, without undermining, human knowledge. Human beings can depend upon divine veracity, i.e. on the moral qualities of God because there is nothing contingent in them. We can be sure that the perfectly good God would not deceive the finite creatures he created; but not because he promised (as he did when he happened to put a rainbow in the sky); but because his truthfulness is one and the same thing as his existence.

So there are three elements in the relationship between the Infinite and the finite when it comes to knowledge. First God must have perfect knowledge of his creation; then he must be willing to share bits of it with us and finally we have to be capable of responding to his cognitive concern for us; we have to be open to the infinite. The various post-Cartesian attempts to provide foundations for knowledge, that did not appeal to God, nevertheless retained, in secular form, these three elements of the divine orientation.

First the world is intelligible because in the beginning are the Laws of Nature, The physicist, Paul Davis, who used to be at Newcastle University, keeps on getting into trouble and winning the Templeton Prize, by giving talks with titles like *Physics and the Mind of God* and saying things such as:

*... the theological dimension of science has faded. People take it for granted that the physical world is both ordered and intelligible. The underlying order in nature - the laws of physics - are simply accepted as given, as brute facts. Nobody asks where they come from; at least they do not do so in polite company. However, even the most atheistic scientist accepts as an act of faith that the universe is not absurd, that there is a rational basis to physical existence manifested as a lawlike order in nature that is at least in part comprehensible to us. So science can proceed only if the scientist adopts an essentially theological worldview.*

Wittgenstein wrote in the *Tractatus*: *The whole modern conception of the world is founded on the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena.*

*The people today stop at the laws of nature, treating them as something inviolable, just as God and Fate were treated in past ages. And in fact both are right and wrong; though the view of the ancients is clearer in so far as they have a clear and acknowledged terminus; while the modern system tries to make it look as if everything were explained.<sup>ii</sup>*

You may think that appealing to the Laws of Nature is not the same thing as thinking that the world has already been thought. But if you think the world is intelligible you are likely also to think that it is intelligible because someone or

something has already thought it. Davis refers to his fellow scientist, Heinz Pagels, who said that *the laws of nature are written in a sort of cosmic code, and that the job of the scientist is to crack the code and reveal the message - nature's message, God's message, take your choice, but not our message.*<sup>iii</sup> The cosmic code is a code; it meets the second requirement that there is a mediation between us and God or Nature.

And Davis provides the third requirement: science is the way we take possession of the world already thought: *The extraordinary thing is that human beings have evolved such a fantastic code-breaking talent. This is the wonder and the magnificence of science: we can use it to decode nature and discover the secret laws the universe follows.* So despite our 'umble status we, or at least some of us, are capable of understanding the Laws.

Operating at a more lowly level than speculations about fundamental physics, I keep on coming across downmarket examples of the rebellion against finitude. Recently a came across the manifesto of the Elixixir Society, a promoter of Immortalism: *Our goal is simple: Kill Disease, Old Age and Death. We demand that the conquest of Disease, Old Age & Death be the Number One Priority of every society on the planet.*<sup>iv</sup> Given the age that I am and the death that awaits me within a few years, I find this stuff at best tasteless. Intellectually it's a loopy example of hubristic expectations and a symptom of the disgust we feel at our bodily existence - a disgust which the Church had the sense to call a heresy when the Manicheans built a theology around it.

The denials of self, which Mary Midgley has criticised in her latest book *Are You an Illusion?* may seem like exercises in humility. She cites Bernard Crick: *You, your joys and sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and your free-will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their attendant molecules*<sup>v</sup>. But in fact reductive statements like that are a rampant form of intellectual hubris. I don't mean that Crick himself is arrogant in saying such things; he is just wrong. It is the idea he is trying to persuade us to accept that is hubristic. We may think we are animals scurrying about an environment, but that is only what it seems like from here; if we saw things as they *really* are, we would understand ourselves in terms of a system of physical particles obeying eternal laws that he and a few colleagues have deciphered. We gain cosmic location but lose local importance.

Here is another recent example. In last Saturday's Times (060914), charming Brian Cox is reported to have predicted that *one day working alongside a robot will mean inviting it to the office party as well*. Commenting on the film *Her*, he says: *I like the idea that we're staring at computers so much, we're becoming dehumanised and, actually, the computer is the most human character in the film*. Again this is wonderful combination of faux humility and arrogance - a modern retelling of the Fall and Redemption. We fall: we become less than human through watching the screen of Good and Evil; We are redeemed: taken up to Heaven in robotic form, we attain eternal life.

All these are forms of intellectual hubris. There are attempts to escape from our organic selves. We should be wary of throwing out intelligence with the organic bathwater. If you want a mind get a life, as we have often said. Intentionality, i.e. reference and meaning, is a function of social, animal life. That is why Artificial Intelligence will always remain artificial. So there is a price for being conscious intelligent beings; the price is being an animal; and the price of being an animal is dying.

Perhaps I take these opinions too seriously. Perhaps Brian Cox is just trying to make an honest buck. By the way do you know that if you join the Dawkins Circle, and move through the various levels, from the Top of Form

Reason Circle: which costs \$1,000 to \$2,499 annually (or \$85/month), through the Science Circle at \$2,500 to \$4,999 annually (or \$210/month) to the inner Darwin Circle at \$5,000 to \$9,999 annually (or \$420/month), you and a companion can have breakfast with Richard. I kid you not; go to the Richard Dawkins webpage to sign up.

## Value Finitude

I have got carried away trying to show that knowledge and finitude don't sit easily together in contemporary thought. I'll argue - more briefly - that finitude is incompatible with deep autonomy. By 'deep autonomy' I mean not just the power to make one's own choices but to create the values in terms of which we make choices. Just as it is hard to explain knowledge without turning ourselves

into gods so it is hard to anchor the categorical demands of morality in the contingencies of human life.

Hume realised that once you get rid of God, *morality ... regards only human nature and human life.*<sup>vi</sup> Morality is indeed very important to us - perhaps as important as anything can be - but it does not reveal us as investors in a universe-wide moral economy. He criticises his friend Frances Hutcheson for trying to retain the absolute nature of moral obligations while admitting that morality arises out of the temporal concerns of human beings, not out of some cosmic dynamism: *You [Hutcheson] seem to embrace Dr Butler's opinion in his Sermon on Human Nature; that our moral sense has an authority distinct from its force and durability, and that because we always think it ought to prevail. But this is nothing but an instinct or principle, which approves of itself upon reflection; and that is common to them all.*<sup>vii</sup> There cannot be absolute moral obligations on creatures as thoroughly contingent as human beings. Obligations go as deep in us as our needs and sentiments, but no deeper. Our moral beliefs do not have an authority that lifts them out of the human world. They have no divine kite mark and despite the best efforts of various philosophical heroes, nothing in the finite world can provide an alternative.

The most heroic attempt was made by Kant with the categorical imperative whereby we spin moral imperatives out of pure practical reason. The most romantic attempt was made by Nietzsche and the existentialist. We create the values that have an absolute grip upon us.

## **The Categorical Imperative**

Kant starts off with the commonsense idea that we are only responsible for what we ourselves directly and completely control - what more can one do than intend to do what one thinks is right. As we have a very uncertain understanding of our characters and motives and are unreliable in predicting the consequences of our actions, the only things over which we have total control are our intentions. So an act is good if it proceeds from a good intention; what makes an intention good must be something internal to the intention itself. It cannot be anything in the character, circumstances or sentiments from which the intention flows, nor from the consequences that flow from it. 'I *ought* to do something' is the only full-stop reason for doing it. Moral obligation is never dependent on

any contingent circumstance; it is always absolute and unconditional. This explains why Kant comes up with his formulations of the Categorical Imperative: *act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law; and act as though the maxim of your action were by your will to become a universal law of nature.*<sup>viii</sup>

So here we are, scruffy, little creatures trying not to bear false witness against our neighbours or covet our neighbour's house, or wife, or servant, or ox, or donkey; and to make any sort of fist of that, we are to act as universal lawmakers, as God. An ironic situation: Kant who bans religious motives from moral action, cannot do without a divine dimension to morality. Seeing as he has banished God he must find in the finite human spirit an infinite dimension.

*Even the Holy One of the Gospels must first be compared with our ideal of moral perfection before we can recognise Him as such ... But whence have we the conception of God as the supreme good? Simply from the idea of moral perfection, which reason frames a priori and connects inseparably with the notion of a free will.*<sup>ix</sup>

## Deep Autonomy

There are many differences between Kant and Nietzsche but Nietzsche also understand morality as a sort of tortured relationship between the finite and the infinite. In his wonderfully dramatic way he sees morality in terms of an aspiration to create values. What I have called deep autonomy. It is a quasi-divine power:

*And you, yourselves, should create what you have hitherto called the World: the World should be formed in your image by your reason, your will, and your love!*

*...if there were gods, how could I endure not to be a god. Therefore there are no gods*

*... what would there be to create if gods- existed!<sup>x</sup>*

## The Absurd

My thought has been that though we have banished the gods, we retain the idea that if we know anything, the world must already be intelligible; and if we value anything, the world must already be valuable. And if we do this we let divine in again not only through the backdoor, but through the roof, windows and down the chimney.

The Existentialist makes heroic efforts to avoid this relapse. *Living*, says Camus, *is keeping the absurd alive.*<sup>xi</sup> Angst and nausea are attitudes to contingency and finitude - contingency all the way down; and finitude which is not domesticated in an infinite frame. The danger with Existentialism is that this cosmic alienation itself takes on a divine dimension. The rejection of the divine itself becomes divine. [Kierkegaard foresaw the danger](#): "*He rages most of all at the thought that eternity might get it into its head to take his misery from him!*"<sup>xii</sup>

Is there an alternative? I'd like to try a connection between these thoughts and the shift that occurred in Wittgenstein's thinking from the 'Mystical' in the *Tractatus* to the account of personal knowledge in the *Investigations*. (I aired these ideas at Neville Hall last year.) In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein says: *The subject* (i.e. you and I in so far as we are subjects of experience) *does not belong to the world; rather, it is a limit of the world.*<sup>xiii</sup> In the final paragraph of the *Tractatus*, you and I have been joined at the limits of the world by the will, values, the meaning of life, and God of course. 'Limits of the world' is a spatial metaphor: inside the world is *whatever can be said*<sup>xiv</sup>; outside, or better, flickering like the northern lights at its very edge are the unsayables. In case we miss the point Wittgenstein uses the term '*The Mystical*' to refer to them and he famously says of them: *What we cannot speak about we must consign to silence.*

In the *Philosophical Investigations* there is no mention of the Mystical, but it has not disappeared completely. The Mystical is domesticated in *The Investigations*. A key passage occurs when he is arguing that talk about our inner states is expressive, not descriptive, and when he is trying to persuade us that this distinction is not some verbal nicety but marks a deep difference between our relationship to things and our relationship to people: "*But you will surely admit that there is a difference between pain-behaviour accompanied by pain and pain-behaviour without any pain?*"--*Admit it? What greater difference could there be?*--"*And yet you again and again reach the conclusion that the*

*sensation itself is a nothing."--Not at all. It is not a something, but not a nothing either! The conclusion was only that a nothing would serve just as well as a something about which nothing could be said. We have only rejected the grammar which tries to force itself on us here<sup>xv</sup>.*

Here Wittgenstein talks of sensation as *not a something, but not a nothing either*; this could be a quotation from Sartre talking about people in terms of absences, negativities and nothingness. Persons and their feelings, thoughts and intentions, their moral and aesthetic dreams are small explosions of the personal into the impersonal world: - wonderful in a small way and quite familiar: they are not something we can speak about - not at any rate in the way we talk about the impersonal world - but we can speak to them, with them, against them, for them.

We can't get rid of the infinite by easing it out to the boundaries of our experience, so we had better tuck it in close.

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<sup>i</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, I, 13, 11

<sup>ii</sup> *Tractatus*, 6.371, 6.372

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.firstthings.com/article/1995/08/003-physics-and-the-mind-of-god-the-templeton-prize-address-24>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://immortalism.com/>

<sup>v</sup> Crick 1994: 3

<sup>vi</sup> *Letters*, I, p. 40

<sup>vii</sup> *Letters*, I, Letters, p. 47

<sup>viii</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals* (1785) translated by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott, Longmans, 1969,422

<sup>ix</sup> *Fundamental Principles*, Second section.

<sup>x</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Of the Blissful Islands

<sup>xi</sup> *The Myth*, p. 47

<sup>xii</sup> [Kierkegaard, Søren](#) (1941). *The Sickness Unto Death*. Princeton University Press. Part I, Ch. 3.

<sup>xiii</sup> T. 5.632

<sup>xiv</sup> T. 4.116

<sup>xv</sup> PI, 304