

Presentism and Small Furry Animals



by Albert Norton, Jr.

We're a half-year out from Groundhog Day. I don't want to wait till then to launch this essay, however, because I'd like us to think about it as a vehicle to better understanding *presentism*, an enemy to living our best lives.

Candlemass

The real significance of Groundhog Day is Candlemas. It's associated with Mary and Joseph's presentation of the Christ child in the temple 40 days after His birth, the day in Levitical law when Mary would become ceremonially clean following delivery of the child (Luke chapter 2). Because Christ is the light of the world, a tradition evolved of donating candles to the church and getting the rest of your household candles blessed for use in the coming year, hence candle-mass.

In medieval Europe the day came to be associated with predicting weather patterns to try to decide when to till and plant, probably associated with this day because it's midway between the winter solstice and the vernal equinox, and so likely coincided with pagan practices relating to weather gods. Christian feast days were often purposely superimposed on top of pagan. Back then, methods to predict weather that we would regard as based in reason and observation would have been combined with pagan beliefs about spirits—they would not have known how to prise those apart.

In Germany they would watch the activity of the badger because it was a hibernating animal, so its activity was relevant to weather patterns. When the Pennsylvania Dutch (Amish, Mennonite, and others from what is now Germany) came to the US they substituted a groundhog because—well because it's not a badger—and so now you know why Pennsylvanians claim a monopoly on all things Groundhog Day.

Probably you're already thinking about the popular 1993 movie *Groundhog Day*, with Bill Murray and Andie MacDowell. The origin story related above is actually reflected in the movie. Phil the weatherman (Bill Murray) is identified with the weatherhog Punxsatawny Phil. Just as the groundhog is in hibernation, Phil is in purgatory. Both correspond to a period of 40 days until they are able to emerge into the light of God's presence, as also symbolized in the candles of Candlemas, and the Hebrew period for ritual purification following childbirth.

Well what does that mean, "purgatory?" Come on, Catholics, help out your Protestant friends. The idea behind purgatory is that a redeemed Christian may not go straight to heaven, there being a need after death but before heaven to suffer for a time to expiate certain sins.

So the idea of purgatory neatly coincides with the return of the groundhog (or Phil the weatherman) back underground or

back into the world where they can emerge into the sunshine. In the movie, Phil remains in this purgatory state by repeating the same day over and over until he expiates his sins: namely, the sin of being a selfish jackass to everyone around him. During his repeat of the day he slowly comes around to a genuine concern for other people, and upon doing so is finally released from purgatory.

Repetition

Now let's go all philosophical for a moment. The repetition of the day is a repeating pattern, like when you sit between facing mirrors at the barber shop and see yourself in a striped apron repeating into infinity. It's like the idea of eternal return, a variation on the reincarnation of certain Eastern religions. Think of the meditations on reincarnation compared to reflections on the lake in E.M. Forster's *Passage to India*. Or the reflection (another kind of reflection, let's say "contemplation") in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* and also Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, unbearable because "einmal ist keinmal," once is never, absent eternal return, so nothing we do matters unless it repeats into eternity.

In the dualist Western vision, the body dies but the spirit continues to live, and the spirit is individuated; that is, it's still you. In the monist religions also the body clearly dies; we can see that plainly enough, but whence the spirit, if it is ineluctable from the body? It is envisioned as being released into a general undifferentiated spirit; a world-soul of some kind, or else is reconstituted in another body, possibly an animal body if one rejects a transcendent God-breathed element differentiating mankind from other animals.

The concept of eternal return is distinguishable from (though influenced by) traditional Eastern reincarnation in that we're to imagine the events of a lifetime being repeated in an endless loop, and the idea, apparently, is that this endless

repetition is what gives gravitas to what we do as human beings. Nothing is important if it's a one-off event (einmal ist keinmal) but our lives have meaning because we're living out a predetermined and repeated pattern, and the repetition is what lends significance. What you do in the next minute matters because you'll do it again in a succession of lifetimes for all eternity. I'm just telling you the concept, I'm not saying it makes sense.

Existentialism

You might recognize in this way of thinking a variant of existentialism. Think of Sisyphus rolling the rock up the hill, again and again. This is an ancient myth but Albert Camus revived it in an essay in 1942 to express an element of post-war existentialism emphasizing ultimate individuality and what might be called "presentism." Presentism is what I'm thinking through. Presentism is what poor Phil the weatherman was sentenced to while he expiated his sin of being a jerk.

Camus didn't present his vision of Sisyphus as one of pointless despair but rather as a means of saying all that matters is this present moment. We have no problem rolling a stone uphill, if the task is mentally separated from all that came before or follows after. It's just how we're spending this particular moment. Just like when you exercise, it's not oppressive because you have no intention of doing it in every moment for the rest of eternity. It's just a brief sacrifice of effort to enrich your life, in the same way we exercise discipline to learn a new language or think philosophically or say "no" to a second helping of ice cream.

The point is, Sisyphus does not need in every moment to be conscious that this is an eternal sentence. He can live in eternal *present*. In typing these words I'm not thinking about whether I will or won't re-type these words forever and ever into eternity. And I'm not thinking about it because I'm concentrating on—and am therefore lost in—the moment. I can

try to delimit my thinking only to the moment, and thereby avoid altogether large questions about eternity and purpose. This is what is meant by “presentism,” except that existentialism would place awareness of the present moment not in willful concentration on the task at hand, but in an inability to see before or after.

The problem, however, is that we have conscious self-awareness not just in the moment, but across time. It's why we consciously sacrifice today for a better tomorrow, for example. Squirrels collect nuts for the winter, but the foresight of human beings goes far beyond that kind of rote unselfconscious instinct. Human beings who actually live in the moment, like animals, are yet human enough to be conscious of the pointlessness of what they do. That's what brings them to despair.

Acute presentism leads to a loss of the felt sense of significance; the “disenchantment” that results from rejection of transcendence. This partly explains all those people around you struggling with life though they suffer from no obvious handicap. Presentism is a symptom of malaise because it means putting on blinders, so to speak, to the significance of what we do in the moment as contrasted to the totality of our lives; and collectively, our history. It is, moreover, a symptom of despair particular to the totalitarian-leaning postmodern world.

Life At the Bottom

Maybe this will help with understanding the evil this sort of presentism presents. Last year I published a [review](#) of Theodore Dalrymple's [Life at the Bottom](#), which I had just read though the book was 20 years old. In it I wrote (with inside quotes being from Dalrymple's book):

Much of the underclass in this posture is “condemned to live in the eternal present,” unable to see outside the bubble of

time and place in which they find themselves. Self-absorption takes the place of self-autonomy, and life becomes boring. Hapless floating through a world made by others results in a delimited imagined time-horizon: "They never awoke to the fact that a life is a biography, not a series of disconnected moments, more or less pleasurable but increasingly tedious and unsatisfying unless one imposes a purposive pattern upon them."

Camus's use of the Sisyphus myth suggests that time is or can be chopped up into discrete moments with all our attention focused on one moment. Just as an individual's moments are discrete each from the other, so each individual's efforts are discrete from the combined quantized efforts of all those other individuals comprising the mass of humanity. All of reality is quantized in the Max Planck sense: space is quantized, time is quantized, humanity is quantized. Severed units of time demark Sisyphus's range of attention, and he himself is a severed unit of humanity. Meaning is not derived from society or a putative God or a general feeling of loving fellow-feeling. It is derived from within. "I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world," (Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*). Meaning is entirely self-generated.

But meaning has to come from outside ourselves. If it's all self-generated we become a black hole of self-absorption consuming ourselves from the inside. We become small feral beasts like the future Pope Gregory in Thomas Mann's [*The Holy Sinner*](#). Or reduced to a hard nut of lifeless matter rolling around pointlessly on the littered floor of the world. Nothing matters. And we see this in postmodern ideology. Even as we move to socialist orientation in our thinking vis-à-vis the *polis*, we paradoxically become atomized and alone. (This was a significant point in Hannah Arendt's [*Origins of Totalitarianism*](#) (1951)). In this way we are ready grist for the totalitarian mill, because in looking outside ourselves we see no God nor even objectivity of value. And so we look

instead to the closest authority we can find, the collectivism of the dialectic.

Sacrifice

Sacrifice is an essential concept in our ability to live meaningful lives. That's a point I hope to return to anon, but we have to start somewhere, so let's consider the impact of presentism on our ability to sacrifice today for a better tomorrow. Presentism precludes sacrifice, obviously, because if you're living in the moment all the time you're not squirreling away nuts for the winter. The absence of sacrifice means also the lack of creativity, because sacrifice means giving up something now to create something better then, just as you study in school now for a richer tomorrow, or discipline your kids for their richer tomorrow—essentially training them to sacrifice, also.

Sacrifice happens because you believe in something outside yourself, and greater than yourself. This is important because the postmodern trope is that there is nothing greater than yourself, and so sacrifice is meaningless. The something greater is your own tomorrow, but also your children's tomorrow when you're gone, and the world's tomorrow because you've given of yourself to make it a little better and not worse. Sacrifice is deeply creative in that fundamental way.

When God created the world, He formed it out of Himself, and made it distinct from Himself. When we sacrifice for tomorrow we form the better future out of ourselves, a reality distinct from our present self. We get glimmers of this through the Old Testament into the New, but still the concept of sacrifice may seem fuzzy. It starts with recognizing that there is something more important out there than me. I don't look inside for answers, I look outside myself.

Creativity is that act of acknowledging something greater than myself, I think, and so it is tied up with sacrifice.

Ultimate creativity is God's creation of the universe. Christ's self-sacrifice was significant because it was no longer a little glimpse, but the ultimate demonstration of ultimate creativity in the form of self-giving, and so I came to see it as essentially the same act as God's creation of the world. They're bookends.

My little sacrifices are nothing alongside God's, of course, so if good comes from these little acknowledgements of a reality far beyond myself, think what the end of Christ's sacrifice will be. I don't know what it will ultimately look like but I'm pretty sure it'll rock the socks off a little baby squirrel, as the kids used to say.