

# St Andrew Holborn Friday Forum

**Abigail Doggett:**

## **What's good about being finite?**

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How many can identify with the following?

Sitting at a desk eating through an entire packet of sandwiches, one of crisps and a slice of cake before realising that you haven't noticed the taste of any, eaten far more than you wanted, not savoured the experience, have no idea where the food came from (that is before making its way onto the shelves of *Pret*), and the main sensation has been one of annoyance and frustration that crumbs have fallen onto the computer, mayonnaise has squelched over papers and you had to look away from your work in order to reach for the food; hand-eye co-ordination not yet being up to reading at the same time as locating lunch.

Or how about wondering why it is that human beings need sleep? Since we do need sleep, all of us (or most of us) probably welcome it with open arms whenever we can get it – indeed, it's ironic that sleep is wasted on the young whose only cry is 'Do I have to go to bed now, Mummy?' when their mother would probably give anything to drop exhausted into bed at that point in time. Yet, I'm probably not alone in wondering why it is I need sleep, and speculating on how much more I could be doing if I didn't always have to spend anything from a sixth to a third of every 24 hours in bed. I'm ashamed to say I once decided that sleep was a luxury that my body should be able to do without and determined to ration myself so that I would only take 4 hours of sleep a night. I actually lasted 4 years on that diet, maybe more than most, and I, perhaps, could have carried on. Needless to say, the Margaret Thatcher jokes were a bit of an incentive to stop! Interestingly, however, I remember being commended for this attitude by someone who was in awe at the amount of extra stuff I would be able to get done in life, having cut out sleep; precisely, my reasoning for doing so in the first place.

Then, there is e-mailing whilst on the phone to parents, multitasking with work during the weekly catch up chat, before realising that not a word spoken down the telephone has been heard. An instinctive 'yes' and 'no' at strategic points in the conversation has

hopefully enabled the lack of concentration to go unnoticed, but, the joys of really engaging with someone else in conversation have passed by.

Or, maybe, there is reading as fast as one can, not enjoying the process of learning, but desperately trying to accumulate knowledge as quickly as possible, and wishing you had Superman's ability to rifle at high speed through the pages of a book.

If you are anything like me (and, frankly, let's hope you're not), life can often contain frequent irritations; a sense of not being able to do all that I think I *should* be able to do. A frustration with being finite. The result: the draining of enjoyment from life.

Many of those who are currently achieving the most in life, by society's standards, are not necessarily the happiest. From personal experience, I can speak to the fact that the more I was doing and expecting of myself, the more I was irritated when, for example, the train journey took longer than I thought it should do. A colleague of mine once confessed that he was ashamed of himself. He had that morning stepped off the tube. There were some people in his way, as there always are. He was stressed and he swore at them and told them to 'Get out of his way.' You can supply the present participle. He is a lovely guy and was shocked by himself. I could completely identify with him. I've known that same urge. If this is success, why are we so irritated and frustrated, and why are so many others hurt in the process?

The causes are undeniably many and various. However, I want to focus on what I think is a category mistake made by Greek philosophers, and I also want to look again at a little known early church father.

Much of Greek philosophy involved a pursuit of the ideal perfection, which was located other than in this material world. Many Greek philosophers were looking for what they called the One, the Highest Idea or Form, the First Principle. The obsession with oneness meant that plurality, variety, and particularity, therefore, were necessarily inferior. As was much that is found in this world amongst earthly beings. Since timeless, unchanging, abstract perfection was the aim, the desire was to escape this world and its ever changing, and time and space bound nature.

There is an interesting assumption underpinning this approach. It is a single, overarching hierarchy of perfection which does not recognise that some things may be appropriate and

*good* for some beings and other, quite different, things appropriate and *good* for other beings; if you like, it does not recognise that certain things, rather than being inferior or defective ways of being, may be part and parcel of what it means for those particular, individual entities to be what they are. But is that right?

Let's take God's omniscience as an example. Whilst God may be omniscient, it may not be possible for human beings to be so. Is this an imperfection? On the contrary, our experience is that there is considerable pleasure and enjoyment for a human in learning and discovering. Delight is taken in the freshness of novelty and uncharted knowledge. That would suggest that human beings are not ontologically imperfect for not knowing everything. Rather, having inquiring minds which do not know everything but go on exploring could be part and parcel of what it means to be a human.

Irenaeus is a church father who has in the past been sometimes overlooked. He was rather swamped by those who came after him who were more heavily influenced by and attracted to elements of Greek philosophy. He, on the other hand, set out a conceptual framework in which it is good and right for humans to be ever changing, growing and developing – something which would be anathema to the average Greek philosopher. Much of Greek philosophy leads to an anxious chase to find ultimate perfection, and intense dissatisfaction until it is found. Irenaeus, in contrast, pointed to a more relaxed celebration of the journey of ever learning and discovering anew.

This is clearly a day for confessions. I have to confess that I have even wondered why it is that we are born so small and unformed and why we have to go through childhood; why not emerge into this world as capable adults, equipped with adult abilities and skills? It's interesting to note that, according to Christian doctrine, the Son of God did not disdain the process of childhood but entered fully into human growth from the womb onwards – a claim concerning a deity that would, quite frankly, give many a self respecting Greek philosopher the heebie-jeebies. Is it possible that God could be affirming this aspect of humanity? Yes, and that is significant.

Technology has, without a doubt, enabled many former barriers of finitude to be pushed back beyond the wildest imaginations of prior generations. I'm extremely grateful for that which technology enables. I make frequent use of it. Yet, I'm more likely to enjoy its benefits, and use such benefits wisely with due thought, if I recognise that at root I remain

finite. I need to acknowledge that technology cannot convert me into an all seeing, all knowing, ever present god.

Technology can encourage us to approach ourselves like machines, and fail to take into account the fact that we are not machines and cannot run like machines. I belatedly began to look into the health benefits of sleeping! You may laugh. I had to convince myself that it was a good idea. Amongst many other things, sleep involves the conscious and sub-conscious sorting through and sifting the myriad items of information which are received in any one day; this is the body recognising its finite ability to handle information and its need to discard so as not to be overwhelmed.

So, what might an acceptance of the goodness of being finite look like? What might it look like to give up on insisting that I must be like God; know everything now, never need rest or sleep, and be everywhere whenever I want to be, without regard for time or space?

Let me highlight a couple of potential benefits. (And this isn't exhaustive.)

Firstly, when we try to cram as much as possible into each single moment, trying to do everything at once, life begins to feel quite flat and homogenous. Variation gives pleasure and interest. There is far greater variety in life if I do one thing at a time, letting each thing have its proper space and time. Let's say I work free of the clutter of food on my desk (thereby, cutting out that irritation), followed by a complete break from work (introducing a change of pace). I savour food, eaten with due attention to what it is and where it has come from, in a different place from my desk, introducing a variety of scenery. Oddly, sometimes I can finish a day like this feeling like I have done, seen, experienced, and, most importantly, appreciated far more than when I was trying to cram everything into each single moment. That is the first benefit – rescuing variety, pleasure and interest

Secondly, our attitude to others, be they persons and things, is salvaged. The attempt to cram more than we can finitely handle into any one moment, not only damages us, it damages the others that we treat in this way. Being crammed into a moment has never benefited anyone I know. Being given appropriate space and time, on the other hand, will result in the others with whom we interact being mutually benefited and enriched. Mutual enrichment enriches us too, so this second point is vital for us also.

I am all too aware that there are powerful objections to what I have been outlining. In this final section, I want to go on to consider how a Christian understanding might go some way to meeting a couple of concerns.

First, there is the damaging effect limitations can sometimes have. I do not want to overlook for one moment that this world contains much that hurts and damages. I am not suggesting that were we all to come to accept finitude, the world's problems would all cease. The Christian obviously believes that much has gone wrong which will ultimately be put right by God, and, in particular, by what happened 2000 years ago in the life and death of Jesus. This talk is considering what a world put right might look like. For many a Greek philosopher, a perfect world would get rid of creaturely aspects of changing, growing, variety, space and time. I'm suggesting that these elements, although currently broken and damaged, are intrinsically good and they are part of being human. They will, therefore, form part of a world put right. We can, accordingly, begin to embrace them here and now.

Second concern: There is the absence of time. It is all very well speaking about allowing the elements of life their proper and individual space and time, yet there isn't enough time, (as we can see in this talk). Life is too short. I know. A significant ingredient in my own drivenness was the shortness of life and my desire for meaningful achievement within its short time span. I find it interesting that, whilst we have a life expectancy, on average, that is far greater than our forebears, we do not feel a corresponding diminution in the pressure of our lives. We are actually living lives that are all the more driven, despite having twice as long in which to do everything. One commentator observed that we get up by the clock, eat and sleep by the clock, get up again, work and then retire. And what do they give us? A wretched clock.

The solution to this objection is not to try to cram more in, since we do not, thereby, end up doing more. We, actually, often up doing less because we don't do it as well.

Yet, is there a more positive hope, other than just pointing out what is not the solution? What if we could live eternally? The Christian message contains such a promise. And, I want to suggest that the possibility of eternal life, if accepted, redeems our frantic concern with life's abrupt curtailment. Finitude is not the same as mortality. Death appears to be the ultimate truncater of all that we want to do, and severer from all that we love. Indeed, it is a paramount example of those broken and damaged aspects of temporality I referred to earlier. But it is, precisely, because, from a Christian perspective, mortality no longer has

the final say that we can relax and enjoy being created finite. Irenaeus speaks of humans holding 'fresh converse' with the Lord forever in eternity; for him, the process of learning and exploring, achieving and growing continues ever onwards. This, incidentally and very importantly, challenges the notion that eternity is going to be boring with nothing much to do.

So, to conclude, living life to the full has subtly come to mean cramming as much in as possible, ignoring (or attempting to ignore) all limitations. Whereas I would suggest living life to the full is to be found in valuing our good and right, space and time bound, finite nature and living fully engaged within that nature. In any one given moment, we might be attempting less but we will be appreciating more, and doing it better and with far greater richness.

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