

Mine is the Kingdom

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When the Conservative politician George Walden left parliament in the 1990s, he gave as one of his reasons that politics had become simply 'the management of illusions'. Since then not only politics but most aspects of life can be described in these terms, and of course the great skill of the illusionist is to persuade us that the illusion is real to the point where we cannot distinguish them. Illusions spring from a recognisably human base and it impacts upon the way our human life is conducted, internally and externally. In this article, I want to raise some questions about the relation of illusions, or if you prefer the term, 'virtual reality', and religion.

We are profoundly susceptible to being shaped by the outer world intermingling with our inner world – that, after all, is how children develop and why horror films terrify us. When Macbeth, on his way to kill Macduff, sees a dagger in front of him, he says, 'Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going.' We are all marshalled by the outer world in ways that connect with patterns in our nature to the point where 'inner' and 'outer' are indistinguishable. Using the eye as a metaphor for this contact, Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke: 'Your eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light, but if the eye is not healthy, your body is full of darkness. Therefore consider whether the light in you is not darkness.' (Lk 11.34-5)

Darkness, Jesus seems to say, can come into us and fill us: darkness *without*, once admitted, resonates with darkness *within*, and, as he points out, we are potentially such deluded creatures that this very darkness can seem to be filling us with 'light'. But read his contrasting teaching in the Gospel of Mark that what defiles us is not what comes into us from outside, but what comes forth from the heart: 'for from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, etc' (Mk 7.20f). The picture emerges that what comes to be dominant in a person has a double source: coming from *outside*, it is internalised and may come to govern us because it connects with something in our nature; coming from *inside*, it presses for expression through the body and the social and cultural world. Like Everything in our cultural world has natural roots and it is the way it is because we are the way we are and vice versa. Nature and culture are mutually reinforcing forces.

Why do these reflections matter? Because we're now living in a cultural context of such power that its constructs are internalised so rapidly and painlessly without our being aware that this is taking place. The capacity of digital culture to blur image and reality targets our innate susceptibility to deal with what is unreal. This propensity has long been recognised: in 17th Century France, Pascal identified in us an impulse to neglect the genuine features of the self and nourish an unreal, alternative version of the self which we put across to others (and more dangerously, to ourselves). Anticipating the postmodern view that our access to the real is only through an invented version of the real, he thinks that 'the real self' is never without an 'imagined self':

'We are not satisfied with the life we have in ourselves and our own being. We want to lead an imaginary life in the eyes of others and so to make an impression. We strive constantly to embellish and preserve our imaginary being, and neglect the real one.... How clear a sign of the emptiness of our own being that we are not satisfied with one without the other and often exchange one for the other.'
(*Pensées* L806)

Pascal takes this very seriously, as should we. You are never alone, but are always accompanied by the constructed, imagined self in which you invest your personal energies and which is conveyed both to others and to ourselves. This imagined self can become a stronger focus of energy than the real self and so there is no *real* world of the self that is unaccompanied by an *imagined* world of the self and other such selves. (One small consequence of this is that there is no isolated, spiritual self untouched by the outer world, no haven of internal emptiness, although each of us does need to preserve a *sanctum* of silence and devotion.)

Visit a website called *Second Life*, an online digital world, imagined, created and owned by its residents which presents itself as a 'metaverse', a user-defined world in which people interact, play, do business, and communicate with one another. Here users create animated *avatars*, imaged versions of themselves -- usually as humans, sometimes as imaginary creatures. The number of registered users is 2.3 million, up from 100,000 in early 2006, making *Second Life* a worldwide cyber phenomenon. It is growing at 20% a month. 'We are competing with the real world,' said one of its founders, 'to create a better place for your mind to live.'

You can buy land in this virtual frontier, and buy and sell things that exist only in this imagined world. Recently there was the ceremonial opening of a 'church of Elvis' in *Second Life* attended by crooning and swooning avatars. Virtual money ('Linden dollars') can be exchanged for US dollars: because residents retain the intellectual property rights of what they devise, they can sell them at various in-world connection points. *Second Life* has produced its first millionaire (from China) who has made her money by selling virtual land and property. It has shopping centres, support centres for stroke victims, corporate centres for companies and a replica of the Darfur refugee camp. Always on the ball, Reuters have opened a virtual news bureau that reports on events in *Second World*.

The expectation is that in a few years the quality of graphics on *Second Life* will match those used in Disney animations, supported by voice interaction among avatars. In case you're wondering, your avatar can have sexual relations with the avatar of another person. But you might have guessed that already because the area of sexuality is rife with unreality. I suspect that digital presentations of *porneia* (unchastity) simply confirm the truth of warnings given years ago by old teachers of moral theology. We still have to guess at the widespread use by men of pornographic material on the web, the human situations which produce this dependence and the impact it might be having on how men and women function. I suspect that a bi-polar condition of, on the one hand, a heightened dependence on virtual reality and a correspondingly depressed engagement with what is real is perhaps a widespread syndrome in the culture that is emerging.

There is a living metaverse of celebrities whose fantasy lives form the backbone of a huge media empire and the stuff of mass fantasy. Have you lost count of the number of times that Madonna has 'reinvented' her body, her image, her *avatar*? What are we to make of

Jade Goody, the Celebrity Big Brother participant who has built a media career on a persona of relentless self-promotion? Take an interest in the troubles of Kerry Katona, the Atomic Kitten, whose marriage to Westlife star Brian McFadden and whose destructive demons of drugs and drink and breast enlargement have been the core of her self-presentation in *Heat* and other magazines. Kerry's troubles are never concealed from us, but we will never know how real they are because we deal all the time with Kerry's projected self, and of course what we see is a figure mediated to us by a press agency that reports, drippingly, on a continuing saga of personal tragedy and imperfect redemption. She is a modern *madonna adorata*, the suffering woman and mother whose weeping never ends, and we need her never to be healed of her wounded heart.

Perhaps the meaning-giving function of religion at a popular level is being replaced by digital versions of the real. At many stages in the Church's life, Christianity must have functioned as the parallel, image-laden version of life, its possibilities and terrors, the metaverse that peopled the cosmos with images of a heaven and hell, and invited participation in a cosmic drama of the end-time. Now, when sensual fulfilment can be so ravishingly portrayed digitally, when cosmic battles with unmatched horrors can be engaged in the hour after supper, do we really need to think about dull things like an impending heaven and hell?

Several questions are worth pondering. Can the flourishing of our nature through virtues and connectedness to the absolute truth and love which God is be seriously impaired by the 'metaverses' imagined by the self? Might the features of transcendence in our nature be diverted, re-directed, modified, diminished and perhaps effectively quashed by the imagined world that we internalise almost addictively? Can the self become dependent on the unreal? The answer to these three questions would be clearly yes.

Imagination always matters, for good and ill. In the Ignatian spiritual tradition, it has a central role in enabling the person to become stimulated in relation to the truth of our condition and the revelatory visitation of God in Christ. Think, for example, of the meditations in the Spiritual Exercises on how the Trinity contemplates the state of the world that needs an Incarnate Saviour, the imaginative entry into the nativity and crucifixion of Christ and the contemplation of God labouring in all things. Through imaginative contemplation I am to visit these dramatic religious 'sites' with the aim of orienting my real self towards Jesus who is God's self-imagining, his *avatar* or epiphany in our created order.

But in what way can Christianity now be an *imaginative* option for people, when the imagination is becoming so stuffed with its products that nothing real or important can get in? I don't know. We know that many people are being drawn to the site of *Second Life* than they are to the Christian site. (I'm taking *Second Life* as a metaphor for the digital world as a whole.) Why head there rather than Sinai or Bethlehem or Calvary or Jerusalem? What do they find in virtual reality that they need? (This should not be answered in a mainly negative way.) And what is the *living* site that we can offer them? It must be the *ecclesia*, the unceasing Pentecost produced by Christ's resurrection, the Eucharist created by the recitation of Scripture and the enactment of sacramental atonement. The portal is the *memoria* in which Christ's life, death and resurrection convey a drama in which the violence springing from human sin – we are all responsible for what takes place on Golgotha – embeds us not in the illusion of sin but in the reality of mercy. On the one hand, digital reality is compulsive and addictive and feeds the

imagined self identified by Pascal; on the other, grace is what takes me out of the self into the self-giving real that we name God. At the Eucharist, and perhaps only there, am I real, free from self-generated illusions.

The urgent question is how the ecclesia can be *real* in contexts where the suspicion is that all religion is the archetypal form of make-believe, a froth within consciousness created by currents in the self. The contexts in which this is a pervasive suspicion are, very simply, every parish and community in the land. The question for believers is 'Is this *ecclesia* to which I belong real, and in what way do I experience it as real, or is it only an inherited, imagined metaverse?' If it is only imagined, then can an imagined *ecclesia* compete face-to-face with an imagined *Second Life*? Can Christianity 'out-imagine' *Second Life* and its virtual siblings? I doubt it.

On the one hand, if we could 'out-narrate' or 'out-imagine' *Second Life*, then Christianity would be a competing, equally illusory metaverse. But, on the other hand, if Catholic Christianity, with its ontology of divine self-imaging, rampant sacramentality (even ordinary things can convey God) and its traditions of imaginative, spiritual role-playing is unable to present itself as a viable option for 'digital natives', then we're not connecting with the way people are.

I will end with two remarks which I come to think are more and more incisive in relation to our present situation: the first is that 'God is missing and is not missed'. Many people now live in a desacralised landscape in which God is not mentioned, but in which digital versions of reality are increasingly pervasive: these features are not unrelated. The second comes from Simone Weil: 'Idolatry is a vital necessity in the cave'. Picking up Plato's image of the cave in which we have access only to projected images of the real, she judges that the worship of false gods in whom or in which we invest our attention is only to be expected. The principal issue for human beings, as the Bible repeatedly tells us, is idolatry by which the self constructs its imagined *avatars*. Of course, in a desacralised age, the idols that we worship will not be called 'God' but will be simply those we create and to which we become addicted.