

The Present Moment and Our Existential Situation

By Peter Samsel

The present time is unlike any within living memory, throwing into high relief the fragility of both ourselves and those structures and institutions—whether medical, economic or otherwise—through which our lives are commonly ordered. However, despite the extremity of the moment, it is, in a sense, no different than any other that either we personally or humanity collectively have experienced or may experience. It is not simply that plagues and calamities have, historically, visited often enough before and will no doubt do so again. Rather, this fundamental equivalence traces to the very nature of the human situation as such. We are, quite evidently, contingent beings. Yet this very contingency is, as it were, balanced on a knife's edge between the existentially frangible and the existentially miraculous.

In body, we stand vulnerable to hunger, thirst, cold, heat, fatigue, pain, illness, injury, infirmity and death. In psyche, we are susceptible to discontentment, depression, loneliness, anxiety, fear, doubt, despair, heartbreak, hatred and self-loathing. In respect of others, we lay exposed to insufficiency, conflict, separation and loss, whether with regard to family, relationships or livelihood. All these, and more, ring our existence from the cradle to the grave. Even when our lives run smoothly—as they may for years—our peace can be swept away in an instant. We live lives of intense inherent fragility, even if we numb ourselves to this much of the time to carry on, until circumstances overwhelm us and we can no longer do so.

And yet, despite this, our very existence is grounded in grace in a manner we cannot fully fathom. Most fundamentally, there is the miracle of Being itself. Then the presence of universal ordering principles—physical laws—mysteriously embedded in, but also outside

the manifest world, which render this world a cosmos, rather than a chaos. Following this are the manifold characteristics of this cosmos, in absence of which our physical existence would be impossible. Such include the universal fine-tuning of cosmological constants governing physical laws and the more particular life-supporting characteristics of our galaxy, sun, solar system, moon and earth, as well as those of our natural environment, including the presence of crucial elements and the crucial terrestrial cycles that regulate them. Then comes the miraculous ordering of life itself, including the irreducible and immensely complex and elegant structures and mechanisms of the cell, the formation of functional organs through cellular organization and specialization, and the comprehensive interrelation of the systems of the body that render possible the existence and continuance of our own particular biological life. Beyond this lies the profound mystery of consciousness, the organization of this consciousness in the form of unitive identity and rational competence, and the innate capacity for language. Finally, there is the reach of our intellectual capacities to types of absolute certainty and truth—such as in mathematics—and the subsequent coordination of these perceived truths with the experienced world.

Such is the character of our lives, whether at this present moment of our experience or any other—at once undermined by fragility and undergirded by grace. Yet this is, as it were, only the ‘cosmological truth’ of our situation. There is a deeper ‘metaphysical truth’ yet more decisive to both our nature and our fate, in respect of which fragility and grace are only muted echoes and shadowed reflections. To be contingent, as we are, is to partake at once of nothing and Everything, of emptiness and the Absolute. These are the true bounds of our existential situation, suspended between the unreal and Real. In light of the first, we have already perished, indeed never were; in light of the second, we are imperishable and have ever been. In either respect, this present moment cannot touch us. Of course, to recognize this and to live from it are distinct concerns—the latter far more challenging than the former—but even should we be unable to hold to this truth in the midst of trouble, it does not cease to be true. In this lies our deliverance.