

Scaling a sandy slope

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [May 10, 2000](#) issue

"Incredible wealth" and "breathless pace"—these are two of the most prominent features of Western societies as the old millennium ends and the new begins. True, it is breathless pace for all and incredible wealth only for some. Yet the eyes of all are set on material wealth and so we keep running, faster and faster. In his classic *The Affluent Society*, John Kenneth Galbraith compared the struggle in modern societies to satisfy wants with the "efforts of the squirrel to keep abreast of the wheel that is propelled by his own efforts." We work in order to spend and we spend in order to work; the faster we work the more we spend, and the more we spend the faster we must work. "If you want to have more cake tomorrow, you have to eat more today." This counterintuitive wisdom of today's economic life has become a basic rule of our lives. And if anyone asks, "Why one would want to eat so much cake in the first place?" we give her a look of surprised incomprehension.

The other day I was leafing through a new volume in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*. In one of his early unpublished writings, Nietzsche observed his contemporaries' obsession with power, glory and moneymaking. If we give our world a good look, he claimed, we will see "refined beasts of prey run, and we [ourselves] run[ning] in their midst." He continued:

The tremendous mobility of human beings on the great earthly desert, their founding of cities and states, their waging of wars, their ceaseless gathering and dispersing, their confused mingling, their imitation and deceit of one another, their mutual outwitting and tramping underfoot, their cries in distress and their joyous cheers in victory—all this is a continuation of animality, as if human beings were intended to regress and be cheated out of their metaphysical disposition; indeed, as if nature, having yearned and labored for human beings for so long, now recoiled from them in fear and preferred to return to the unconsciousness of instinct.

The bait with which human beings have been lured into slavery to their inane desires is “earthly happiness.” And the veil they hang “over the vulgar and animalistic face of a wild lust for existence” in order to hide its true nature from themselves is a “culture of luxury”—“the rich and powerful human being, a free personality, the cultured state.”

The slippage into animality is neither human fate nor a result of the mindlessness of consumers or the deviousness of producers, argued Nietzsche. It is rather a strategy of evasion.

Everyone knows from his own experience how unpleasant memories suddenly force themselves upon us and how we then make an effort to drive them out of our heads by means of violent gestures and sounds—but the general structure of our life indicates that we always find ourselves in such a state: What is it that assails us so often, what mosquito is this that refuses to let us sleep?

In this fragmentary text, Nietzsche does not tell us what it is that disturbs our rest and what troubling message it seeks to whisper into our ears. The only clue we get is a mysterious reference to our “metaphysical disposition” that nudges us to elevate our “gaze beyond the horizon of the animal.”

The idea of a human “metaphysical disposition” led my thought back across the centuries to Gregory of Nyssa, whom I had been reading earlier this year in preparation for teaching a class on eschatology. Gregory contrasts the true progress of a soul who seeks the infinite God with the seeming progress of a soul oriented toward finite things. The latter is “like those who scale a sandy slope. Even if they look like they are traversing great tracts of ground on foot, they tire themselves to no avail. Each time the sand slides to the bottom, in such a way that there is a great effort of movement but not progress.”

Those who merely seek sensual pleasures, material possessions or earthly glory are like children whose carefully crafted sandcastles are washed by the waves, like beasts that go in circles with eyes blinkered and necks tethered to the millstone of this life. If human beings seek to hold onto things that are dissolving and flowing away from them, they will end up “swept away by the current of what is unstable.”

The only proper object of human desires is the inexhaustible richness of the eternal God. As Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it in *Presence and Thought*, for Gregory, created spirit is meant to realize that “paradoxical synthesis of a desire that can only grow in joy, because the infinity of the object loved increases and rejuvenates in it for all eternity an impetus that tends toward an end that cannot be attained.”

If Gregory is right, it could be that the “mosquito . . . that refuses to let us sleep” and that we are trying to drive away with our frantic activity is none other than the divine Spirit telling us that our ultimate fulfillment is only in the mystery of the infinite God.

Ludwig Feuerbach famously suggested that we project our worldly ideals onto God and then worship them; God’s infinity is the reverse side of human insatiability. But I suspect that we are involved in an inverse projection, by which we infuse the works of our own hands with the spurious ability to satisfy our hunger for the infinite God. The endless stream of new goods and services which keeps us running at “breathless pace” has become for us a cornucopia of mystery, protection and salvation. It looks utterly worldly, and yet inscribed all over it is a misdirected desire for God.