

## The blessing of an empty paradise; reflecting on 'Paradise#1' (2015).

Coen Vunderink's paradise seems to be unpopulated – empty, in this sense. We see palm trees, suggesting a geographical *place*, on earth. We are not there, but we could be. We could *strive* to be there – just as with every other place we know of.

But when thinking about 'paradise', we are not just reflecting on an ordinary place. The word 'paradise' has strong *normative* connotations. 'Paradise' is another word for a certain type of perfection. A paradise *must* be good, true and beautiful – otherwise it wouldn't be a paradise. For the very same reason, inhabitants of a paradise are *necessarily* happy, beautiful and good.

In other words, 'paradise' is the golden standard of places. When you are not in paradise, you want to get as close as possible. You want to reach it. The idea of a paradise alone steers your wishes and your actions. And when you are in, you know that being kicked out of it is not a good thing. Matters will only get worse.

So, what should we think about the fact that Vunderink's paradises are empty, that traces of human beings are entirely absent? One could argue that Vunderink's view is pessimistic, but I would like to argue that this is not the case. An empty paradise is a blessing.

A paradise is a place where everyone feels fine. It's always summer, living is easy. But would you really want to spend your life in such a place? Suppose, as a famous philosophical thought experiment goes, that you are offered to spend your life in a kind of dream machine, a capsule, and that this machine will manipulate your brain, causing an endless sleep and giving you a continuous flow of great sensations. Would you step into it?

If you think that being happy is the same as feeling happy, it would be perfectly rational to answer 'yes'. But to put it in Nietzschean terms: what you would choose then is a life filled with pills: a pill for the day, a pill for the night, and, when it all comes to an end, an extra pill for the moment of your death. Easy living.

We humans are 'the most chronically and profoundly sick of all sick animals', Nietzsche wrote. We are indeterminate beings, not capable on acting upon impulses alone, as healthy animals do. Rationality, our capacity to think, to determine what we should do, the instance by which we can regulate our impulses – it is not a characteristic that makes humans special and valuable, as the we often tend to think.

On the contrary, it is a major source of our suffering, as Nietzsche's philosophical predecessor, Arthur Schopenhauer, already argued. Because we are rational, and because we have to shape ourselves, we are not capable of living in the moment. We live in different simultaneous worlds at the same time; we are continuously considering possible scenarios of our projects and our lives. Our daily business is making plans, identifying and anticipating problems, dangers, and treats, and we are constantly re-evaluating our options and possibilities. We have to, because we are sick.

And by means of our rationality, we are also able to discover that we are the sickest of all animals. *That* knowledge is almost unbearable. We *need* the idea of a paradise, in order to be able to cling to

the idea that our world is (was, will be) just, good, right, and beautiful. Maybe not always. Maybe not for everyone. Maybe not to its fullest potential. But some grains (or even the *promise* of some grains) of truth, beauty and goodness are better than nothing.

So, 'paradise' is not only a physical place, something out there – the idea of 'paradise', of perfection, is in our minds, in the way we look at ourselves, and look at the world. It shapes the way we act and react. It indicates for us the direction we should be heading for. It helps sick animals to survive.

For Descartes, this idea of perfection that is in our minds, could function as a proof of the existence of God. If we look around us, we see all kinds of things in all kinds of qualities. But we don't see perfection – only *imperfections*. The only way we can know of perfection, of paradise, Descartes argues, is thus by an act of God, the most perfect, true, good and beautiful One. God is good, and that's the reason He let us know something we cannot know by ourselves.

But for us, human beings living after the death of God, it becomes increasingly difficult to see perfection as something unconditionally positive. True, we *act* - and when we act, we implicitly assume that we will improve something. If we won't think that our actions will not better our situation, we would not act at all. So there is an idea of perfection working on the background, an idea of paradise, an idea about what is valuable and what is worth striving for.

But at the same time, we know that many of the goals we set, are just expressions of our preferences, nothing more. Our goals change when we grow older, when we reflect more, and sometimes everything we do just seems futile. And when we are committing ourselves to what we do, when we are striving hard to realize an ideal, we often become convulsive, blind, one-sided, caged... or worse. A relation, or a society, based on a too rigid idea of perfection, all too often ends up in the use of violence.

So... the idea of a paradise is a difficult one for us. Possible dangerous, even. But we probably can't live without it. It might be the best strategy to blend commitment with mild irony. We should cherish our ideals, but always keep in mind that they are just all too human – and that we should not make the mistake to think that our ideals are fixed, 'objective', that our paradise is external to us and God-given.

In this sense, it's a good thing that those paradises of Vunderink are empty, not reached or populated by humans yet, and that they are sometimes a bit unsettling to look at.

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