



“Something that matters”: the Religious Dimension of Moral Experience

“Algo que importa”: a dimensão Religiosa da Experiência Moral

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Abstract

Written from a broadly atheist point of view, this paper explores the religious dimension of moral experience, that is, whether in order to be moral and/or to live a life that in our own eyes *means* something it is necessary to believe in something that transcends what we can verify through science or direct observation and even what we can clearly articulate. I investigate the question through an interpretation of the work of four very different writers, namely Hans Jonas, Alfred North Whitehead, Albert Camus, and Cormac McCarthy, who all contribute valuable insights that suggest the impossibility of a moral life, and indeed any decent human life at all, that is based purely on tangible reality and the rationally justifiable.

Keywords: Morality. Religious Experience. Faith. Meaning of Life. Absurdity.

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Resumo

Escrito a partir de um ponto de vista amplamente ateu, este artigo explora a dimensão religiosa da experiência moral, isto é, se para ser moral e/ou para viver uma vida que, a nossos próprios olhos, significa algo, é necessário acreditar em algo que transcende o que podemos verificar por meio da ciência, da observação direta e até mesmo do que nós podemos articular claramente. Investigo a questão por meio de uma interpretação do trabalho de quatro escritores muito diferentes, a saber Hans Jonas, Alfred North Whitehead, Albert Camus e Cormac McCarthy, os quais contribuem com valiosos insights que sugerem a impossibilidade de uma vida moral e, de fato, afinal, de nenhuma vida humana decente que esteja baseada puramente na realidade tangível e no que é racionalmente justificável.

Palavras-chave: *Moralidade. Experiência Religiosa. Fé. Significado da Vida. Absurdo.*

Introduction

Can one be moral without believing in God or at least in *something*, some unknown power that gives permanent significance to what we do? It sure seems one can be a good person without any such belief, somebody who is a good neighbour who doesn't lie to you or try to hurt you and who behaves decently. Someone who, by and large, does the right thing. Yet can one actually believe that actions are good or bad in themselves or that it really matters what we do and what we don't do without some kind of faith? If there is no God, just an unfeeling universe, if there's nothing and nobody that cares what we do, so that in the long run it doesn't make any difference what we do or don't do because it will all go to hell anyway (humanity will go extinct, or the sun will explode, or something else will happen that will destroy all traces of our existence), then it seems pointless to try to do the right thing. Because there is no right thing, and because no matter what we do, the result will always be the same: we are dead, and everyone else is too. All in vain. In order to be moral, *deliberately* moral, and not just accidentally so, we need to believe that it *matters* what we do, that it *makes a difference*, not just now and in relation to our present, transient

interests and concerns, but *absolutely*. That there are more important things than our own existence and well-being. But what *could* there be more important than that if there are no permanent achievements, nothing that might actually change the course of the world?

I'm an atheist, but I share some of the intuitions that seem to inform the faith of religious people. I don't believe in God, but I do believe that things matter, and I'm trying to understand how that is possible and what it means. The following reflections, guided by three philosophers and one novelist, should be considered as a first attempt to do so.

Do Angels Have Genitals? A Curious Proof of God's Existence

The odd question whether angels have genitals, which, I've been told, was already hotly debated by scholastic theologians, was raised again by the great Jewish-German philosopher Hans Jonas in an article that was published in 1990. The article is called "Vergangenheit und Wahrheit" (Past and Truth) and has, as far as I know, yet to be translated into English. I stumbled across this article a couple of months ago and I couldn't help being fascinated by the argument that Jonas presents here: a new and actually quite original and convincing proof (as far as such proofs go) of the existence of God (JONAS, 1992).

When Jonas asks whether angels have genitals he is of course not looking for an answer. Rather, he uses the question to make a point, namely that it doesn't make any sense to argue about the properties of something that doesn't exist. So if we assume that there are no angels, that angels are mythical beings and not real ones, then it is neither true to say that angels have genitals, nor is it false. Nor would it be quite correct to say that neither do angels have genitals nor do they not have them. They do not belong to a class of things to which the laws of logic do not apply. Instead, they are not things at all; they are literally nothing, so that it doesn't even make sense to ask the question whether or not they have genitals.

Now, among the things that do not exist, are also all past events. What is past, no longer exists. It may have existed once, but now it does not exist. Yet we tend to assume that statements about past events are true or false, even though we may never be able to ascertain which statements are true and which false. Did Napoleon blow his nose on that fateful day when he lost the battle of Waterloo? Did he think of his former wife Josephine who had died the year before? Did he perhaps try to figure out whether angels have genitals? Even though nothing has been recorded that would answer those questions, it nonetheless seems that there must be an answer that either he did those things, or he did not do them. But if the past does not exist, if it, or at least that particular part of the past, is completely and utterly gone, unrecorded and not remembered by anyone, then do we not have to conclude that the question whether or not Napoleon thought of Josephine during the battle of Waterloo is just as meaningless as the question whether angels have genitals? And meaningless not because we could never *know* whether the answer someone gave was true or false, but rather because there is no fact in relation to which an answer could be true or false. Napoleon, being past and gone and hence a non-existent entity, did not think about Josephine, nor did he not think about her. Napoleon does not exist, and non-existent entities do not think.

Is that too weird a thought? Try to look at it from this angle: we are used to say that past events cannot change. They are fixed, always stay what they were. Either Napoleon did think about Josephine or he did not, and if he did, he will always have thought about her on that particular day, and if he did not, he will never have thought about her that day. But if the past does not exist, how can it be *fixed*? How can it be *unchangeable*? In order to be unchangeable, it seems, the past must in some way still exist. It must be there to have properties. But where, or how exactly, is it? Let us imagine an Orwellian government that is powerful and determined enough to destroy all the traces of the real past, that changed all the history books, all documents that tell us about what really happened, and thus invented a new past, which would then, for us and for everyone and for all practical purposes and

for all that anyone will ever know, *be* the past. Or would it? Would it be a false past, to be clearly distinguished from the true past? Yet if there is no trace of the true past left, in what way *is* it the true past?

Now, Hans Jonas suggests that in order to make sense of our belief that past events are real, so that statements about the past have a truth value (i.e., are either true or false), we must assume that there is something that preserves the past in the present, and that means the whole past, every single detail of it. So what we need is a kind of *cosmic memory* in which nothing ever gets forgotten. But a memory cannot exist on its own, but only as part or aspect of a *subject* that remembers. And that subject is God.

Jonas is of course quite aware that these reflections do not amount to a full-blown proof. It's just an idea, a probably feeble attempt to make sense of it all, but I personally find it strangely persuasive. Let us again use our imagination. This time let's imagine the world in a few billion years, shortly after the earth has been absorbed by the sun. Nothing is left of life on earth. Nobody who remembers any of it. No traces of anything that happened before this event anywhere. Thus the situation is exactly like it would be if there never had been any life on earth, no humanity, no you or me. Nothing any of us has ever done or is ever going to do will have made a difference. Yet if at some stage in the future the world is exactly like it would be if we had never existed, so that there is no difference between a world in which we existed and a world in which we didn't, then in what way have we existed at that time? If there is no difference between those two worlds, then there is no difference between our having existed and our not having existed.

Now it seems to me that this conundrum has also ethical implications. If it is all going to be the same in the end, then in the long run it doesn't make any difference what we do. So why bother? Why try to do the right thing? Do we not, in order to think that what we do matters, have to believe that somehow, in some form, what we do lives on, not just for a while, but forever? That there is some kind of cosmic memory that remembers, and will always remember, what we did, and for which it *does* make a difference?

The Subtle Beauty of a Flower

This idea is, of course, not entirely new. A similar point was made already by the British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead in the late 1930s. Like Jonas, Whitehead argues that there has to be such a cosmic memory, but not in order to give presence to the past as such, but to preserve and sustain the *values* that have been achieved in the ongoing process that we call the history of the universe, and not just human values, because for Whitehead the world is throbbing with values. In fact, value experience is at the base of all existence. Human experience, however, is capable of generating new kinds of values, among them aesthetic and moral values, which are unknown to, and not accessible in, the non-human world. Yet most of us live our lives without having any noticeable impact on the course of events. Many of us dream of making the world a better place, but only few ever manage to do so. It is probably much easier to make the world a worse place, but fortunately not too many of us manage that either. For most of us it seems that, had we never existed, the world would be pretty much the same. All our struggles, everything we have ever achieved, will have been in vain. There may be some people whose life we have influenced in a good way, and they may remember us for a while, but very soon we will be forgotten together with everything we did, and those who remembered us for a while together with what *they* did will also be forgotten. And once humanity has entirely disappeared from the earth, nothing at all will remain of our existence, and it won't matter one bit what we did and whether we did right or wrong, good or bad. Once we have become fully aware of the transience of all particular existence, once we have accepted that nothing will remain, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that there is nothing really worth fighting or dying for, nothing even worth giving up the slightest pleasure for. All that matters then is what matters for me here and now. Nothing matters beyond my immediate personal interests. From the standpoint of the universe, it makes no difference what we do. The universe doesn't care. It treats Adolf Hitler and Mother Teresa with equal indifference, so why shouldn't we be equally indifferent towards them? Yet despite this apparently rational conclusion, we often have the feeling that it *does* matter

what we do, that our actions *do* make a difference, not only at the present moment or for a limited amount of time, and not only for ourselves or for others, but rather absolutely: "Everything has some value for itself, for others, and for the whole" (WHITEHEAD, 1938, p. 151).

Part of this value experience, which is at the same time an experience of *reality*, is the experience, or perhaps we should better say the intuition, that what has once become real, will always retain its significance, and it will do so independent of whether anyone is aware of that significance or even whether there is anyone who *could* become aware of it. "There is," Whitehead writes in *Modes of Thought*, one of his later books, "a unity in the universe, enjoying value and (by its immanence) sharing value. For example, take the subtle beauty of a flower in some isolated glade of a primeval forest. No animal has ever had the subtlety of experience, to enjoy its full beauty. And yet this beauty is a grand fact in the universe. When we survey nature and think however flitting and superficial has been the animal enjoyment of its wonders, and when we realize how incapable the separate cells and pulsations of each flower are of enjoying the total effect — then our sense of the value of the details for the totality dawns upon our consciousness. This is the intuition of holiness, the intuition of the sacred, which is at the foundation of all religion" (WHITEHEAD, 1938, p. 164). Whitehead's whole philosophy is pervaded by a strong religious sense, which, however, stays clear of dogmatic theology. This is not the place to go into the details of Whitehead's rather idiosyncratic concept of God. Suffice it to say that God, in one of his functions, is taken to be a comprehensive unity of experience, something like the memory of the universe, in which every value that has ever been achieved, is stored forever, and that means that it will continue to influence what is happening in the world, because nothing is ever simply there. Connectedness is of the essence of all things. So what God does is make sure that nothing is ever lost.

This is not an arbitrary contrivance or merely an element inherited from the philosophical tradition, but rather — as almost anything in Whitehead's philosophy — an interpretation of experience. By describing God as some kind of universal repository of values, Whitehead

attempts to do justice to the strong, widely shared, intuition that it cannot be a mere accident that at some stage in the history of the universe inanimate matter gave rise to life, and that life has developed over millions of years to become more and more complex, eventually turning what has started out as an amoeba into a human being. Nor can it be a mere accident and of no greater significance that humanity has progressed to its present state and that we, you and I, are here and that we live our own personal lives the way we do. There must be something more at stake here than just the satisfaction of arbitrary local values. There appears to be some end towards which all this is directed, even though we may not have the slightest idea what this end is. We just feel that all that effort cannot have been spent in vain. And that is the reason why sometimes it seems so important to us to do what is right and to avoid what is wrong. "What does haunt our imagination", remarked Whitehead in his last public lecture, given at the Harvard Divinity School, "is that the immediate facts of present action pass into permanent significance for the Universe" (WHITEHEAD, 1948, p. 72). Morality is based entirely on this religious intuition.

Although we are not able to foresee all the consequences of our actions, we do feel that it matters what we do. The beauty of that flower in its isolated glade, which nobody has ever experienced, yet which is still there, shows that there are perfections that will only become relevant in the future when they can finally be experienced. The beauty of nature was there before humans existed who could fully appreciate it. Similarly, what we do and achieve today, may reveal its significance only in the far future, or it may never reveal itself at all, at least not to us.

Camus and the Meaning of Life

But do we really need our lives to be significant? Is the fundamental assumption that many of us seem to share really convincing, namely that a life that "means" something is better (more worth living) than a life that means nothing?

David Bellos, in his introduction to the Everyman's Library edition of Albert Camus's *The Plague* (and other writings) (2004), chides Camus for his alleged belief that an absurd world, that is one that lacks a God and in which, consequently, nothing has any meaning (beyond itself), is somehow deficient. If everything we did had "meaning", he argues, life would be pretty much unbearable: "Things would surely be far worse if the opposite were the case. If the world were not at all absurd, in Camus's sense, then things in general and acts in particular would be endowed irrevocably with 'meaning'. And that would make the world a very strange and inhuman place indeed. Every cup of tea, broken shoelace, premature death, and outbreak of slaughter would be 'meaningful', that is to say fully explicable in terms of a higher order, and thus necessary. Under such conditions, human life, which characteristically involves imponderable choices, rough guesses, effort, and surprise, would surely seem quite futile, since no matter what a person did, it would fit in with a higher scheme by the very fact of having been done. A necessary world thus seems to many readers (myself included) as rather more absurd than one in which meanings are not given".

This sounds pretty convincing. However, the whole argument rests on a conception of meaningfulness that equates meaning with complete explicability and necessity, and I'm not sure that we have to understand (objective?) meaningfulness in those terms. Is a meaningful life necessarily one in which there is an explanation, a good reason, for everything that happens and everything we do? Is there no scope in a meaningful life for chance and choice? Can our lives only be meaningful if the universe is deterministic, if human freedom is an illusion? If that were the case, then it would indeed be strange if we lamented the lack of meaning. However, Bellos himself seems to acknowledge the possibility of understanding meaning in a different, non-deterministic way when he argues that human life would appear "rather more absurd" and would "surely seem quite futile" if everything we did "fit in with a higher scheme". A life that is not absurd and not futile — that is more or less what we mean by a meaningful life. So the question is what makes a life not futile, not absurd. I guess that most people would agree that we at least have to be able to make our own choices, which

also means that there must be the possibility of failure, of not doing the right thing. If things turned out to be fine no matter what we did, then there doesn't seem to be much point in doing it in the first place. That doesn't mean that the freedom to make one's own choices is in itself sufficient to make our lives meaningful. Perhaps there is something else required, but that something doesn't have to be a divine plan or any other kind of "higher scheme". I also don't see why it should be the case that a life can only be meaningful if everything matters in it, every cup of tea we drink, every shoelace that breaks. Why can there not be things in our lives that do not matter much or do not matter at all, pockets of indifference as it were, while others matter a great deal ("outbreaks of slaughter" for instance and how we react to them)?

Moral things matter. That they matter defines them. But do they always matter, even if they are ultimately in vain? Thaddeus Metz, in a paper on the differences between happiness and meaningfulness (2009), argues that "performing an action that is likely to help others has meaning, but the action would have even more meaning if it actually ended up benefiting them". It is easy to see that being engaged in trying to help other people doesn't necessarily make us happier (because it often requires personal sacrifices), but it is quite possible that it makes our lives more meaningful. But is it correct to say that meaning *increases* if we are *successful* in our attempts to help others? Admittedly this sounds plausible enough.

However, consider the following dialogue in Camus's novel *The Plague* (2004): when his friend Tarrou asks Dr. Rieux, who has been working tirelessly, though largely unsuccessfully, trying to help those who have come down with the plague, why he is showing such devotion to his task, he replies that he wants to defend people as best he can. When Tarrou asks him against whom or what he wants to defend them, he replies that he doesn't really know. It is just that he "never managed to get used to seeing people die". What he objects to, instinctively, and what he struggles against, is the order of the world, which "is shaped by death". But of course, if that is what he is up against, he simply *cannot* accomplish his goal. The plague seems incurable. People

die despite his best efforts to help them. Yet even if he managed to find a cure against the plague and to actually save people, then all he would have achieved is a postponement of death, which will catch up with them eventually. When Tarrou points this out to him, saying that his "victories will never be lasting", he agrees: his whole life as a physician is in fact a "never-ending defeat", symbolized by the incurability of the plague. Yet despite being aware of this, Rieux insists that this "is no reason for giving up the struggle".

So here's the situation, which, for Camus, marks the absurdity of life: Rieux cannot help anyone, not permanently, and he knows it. What he does thus appears utterly futile. Yet the *struggle*, despite its futility, still seems important. Perhaps more important than what that struggle achieves or not achieves. But how can that be? How can it be important to put up a fight if we've got absolutely no chance of winning it? And is it conceivable that, paradoxically, the fight we fight in the full knowledge that we cannot win it actually gives *more* meaning to our life than a fight that we still have some hope of winning someday?

Moral Faith: hope against all Hope

The fundamental question of morality is why we should care. Of course, we may *find ourselves* caring about the world and certain things in the world. But the question is, if we don't, why *should* we? And it seems to me that this question can only be answered by faith. We should because it matters what we do, even when there is no realistic hope that it will make any difference. This faith doesn't have to be an openly religious faith. At least it is not to be mistaken for an unshakeable trust in an omnipotent and benevolent God. On the contrary. It is a faith that persists through the gravest of doubts, through the heights of despair. It is a hope against all hope. Let's call this the *moral faith*. Let me illustrate what I mean by that through a brief discussion of a particular literary text, namely Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, which was published in 2006.

The Road is a bleak tale about a father and his son trying to survive in a post-apocalyptic America. Only a few humans are left, and most of them would eat you alive if they got the slightest chance. No animals, no living plants, at least none that one could live on, all dust and ashes, empty and hopeless, a bit like the world that the traveller in H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* encounters when he travels on to the far future when humanity has disappeared from the planet. We don't get any explanation for why the world has become that way; it just has. And McCarthy makes it pretty clear that there really is no hope left, nothing to live for. The world is a literally god-forsaken place and is quickly grinding to a halt. "The frailty of everything revealed at last." The few people left are not survivors, because there is no world left for them to live in. Instead, they are the walking dead. But despite this utter hopelessness, and without knowing why, the man carries on, trying to protect his son, to keep him alive and to keep him human. Still, in the end he dies, because die he must, and his son lives on, for a while, having found new protectors in a man and a woman who take him under their wing. But of course the world is still the same empty place, so it seems only a matter of time before they too must succumb to the hostile world that can no longer be a home to them.

The strange thing about this story is that although the world is ending and there really is nothing left to hope for, the main protagonist, the unnamed man, stubbornly, almost defiantly, keeps on protecting his son, pushing him forward to a non-existing future. His actions betray a hope that persists against all hope, a hope that cannot be extinguished, not even by the greatest despair. And desperate he certainly is, cursing the God that has let this happen. "He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God." But God doesn't answer. He, too, has left, has abandoned his creation. Or perhaps he has never been there in the first place. Perhaps it has always been an illusion, the crazy idea that the universe has eyes and ears to see and listen to our pain and sorrows and, somewhere, somehow, a

compassionate heart to feel for us and with us. Perhaps the world has revealed its true nature at last.

"He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like groundfoxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it".

The revealed emptiness is almost unbearable. "There were few nights lying in the dark that he did not envy the dead." So why carry on? Why not die with the rest of the world? Maybe because there is still some beauty left, which appears even more precious, far more precious, when it is in danger of vanishing forever, when it has become the rarest thing imaginable. Beauty in the human heart that loves, and beauty in the human form that is being loved.

"No list of things to be done. The day providential itself. The hour. There is no later. This is later. All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one's heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes. So, he whispered to the sleeping boy. I have you".

"There were times when he sat watching the boy sleep that he would begin to sob uncontrollably but it wasn't about death. He wasn't sure what it was about but he thought it was about beauty or about goodness. Things that he'd no longer any way to think about at all".

The man tells the boy that they are the good guys and that they "carry the fire". It seems important to the boy. What fire? The fire of humanity. The fire of what is, or ever was, good and true and beautiful in the world. This fire is also the breath of God. There is even a suggestion, on the very last page of the book, that the fire will always be there. Before his father dies he tells the boy that even when he will be dead the boy could still talk to him. But the woman who then finds him tells him about God, so he tries to "talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didn't forget. The woman

said that was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all time”.

However, the very last paragraph once again emphasises the impossibility of turning things around, of repairing what cannot be repaired. That once things are lost, things that ought to be precious to us, they cannot be retrieved. Once they are lost, they are lost forever. And we are reminded of the beauty of this world and how important it is to take good care of it, so that it does not go away and leave us behind in an empty world. We, not God, are this beauty’s guardians. And that is precisely why it matters what we do.

“Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery”.

And with this reminder of the mystery at the heart of all things I want to conclude — as we all must in the end.

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Recebido: 08/09/2016

Received: 09/08/2016

Aprovado: 10/10/2016

Approved: 10/10/2016

