EXPERIENCE AND THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION

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It is a little-known fact that in British schools there is a requirement to teach spirituality throughout the curriculum. The word ‘spirituality’ is not defined, and it is largely left to individual schools to decide what they might mean by it. It should presumably have something to do with ‘spirit’. But that word covers a wide spectrum of meanings.

At one end of the spectrum there is belief in the existence of Spirit – In German, ‘Geist’ -which, as in Hegel for instance, is one absolute non-material entity which is the basis of all material reality, and which is mind-like or conscious in some way. Spirit is not quite the same as God, and many philosophers in Britain in the early twentieth century believed in Spirit, but did not like God very much. Unlike the term ‘God’, which is a masculine noun often taken to denote a non-embodied Person, ‘Spirit’ is without gender, and may be relatively impersonal, though it can be described as intelligence and bliss. The Sanskrit term ‘Brahman’, sometimes described as ‘Sat-Cit-Ananda’ (‘Being, Intelligence, and Bliss’) is one way of thinking of Spirit. It does not entail that this non-material reality has revealed anything to anybody, or that it rewards and punishes human actions either in this life or in the next. It is more a way of saying that the material elements of human life – whether they are superstrings, quarks or other fundamental material particles – are not the only or the most important aspects of reality. There is a non-material basis for the physical world, and it is remotely similar to human consciousness and thought (at least more similar than it is to unconscious material particles acting according to blind and purposeless laws of nature).

At the other end of this wide spectrum of meanings, the word ‘spiritual’ need not be taken as a referring noun at all. As when one might speak of ‘the spirit of the age’, it can be concerned with the values and basic attitudes of a people or a culture. The word will not refer to a material thing, but it might not refer to one spiritual or mind-like thing either. It could simply stand for a set of basic beliefs and values, and having spirituality might then mean having some ultimate values or guiding principles for life.

I think that people who speak of ‘being spiritual’ usually have something more distinctive in mind. Without wishing to tie that down too strictly, there are two features that seem important. One is that being spiritual is having a specific practice, a discipline that seeks to instil specific values into one’s own life, perhaps a discipline of meditation or some form of ritual practice. The other is that the values in question are thought to be objective, in the sense that they are not arbitrarily chosen. They are values which really exist, and which there is some obligation or demand to pursue. They are objective values, not purely subjective ones. Thus ‘to be spiritual’ is to follow a practice which takes specific values and ideals as central to one’s understanding of life, and as goals which it is objectively good to pursue.

One might speak of a ‘spiritual dimension’ to human experience in a way that could embrace this whole range of meanings, from postulating the existence of one Spirit of supreme value, to finding many objective values in various aspects of human experience. Spiritual practices would be means of elucidating and clarifying these values, and realising them in one’s own life.

There may be many reasons why the word ‘spirituality’ has become important in our society. One of them is that the institutions of traditional religion have come under much criticism for their seemingly authoritarian attitudes which, both with regard to modern scientific knowledge and to rapidly changing moral beliefs, seem too many to be out of touch with reality. Another is that the encounter of differing claims to apparently absolute revelation in an increasingly globalised world has often led to scepticism about how one could possibly choose between them, and to a refusal to sign up to any of them. Spirituality can then be seen as a personal search for objective value and meaning, not restricted to any ancient authorities, but perhaps able to take some elements, and reject others, from many old religious traditions.

Later in these lectures I intend to address both these points, and argue that things are not as bad for religion as they might seem. At present I simply want to address the fact that although in Britain and perhaps in Europe generally participation in religious institutions is very low, there is still a widespread feeling that there is something more to human life than just making money and gaining pleasure or social status. There is a spiritual dimension which could give objective value and meaning to human existence, and which it might be possible to experience.
In this lecture I want to give some support to this view, and to show that it is not just some airy-fairy ‘new age’ fantasy, but that it is based on sound philosophical foundations. In my next lecture I shall consider in more detail some of the varied world-views that are current in contemporary philosophy. But I shall begin with one that has some claim to be called the traditional British philosophy, the empiricist tradition that is associated with Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, one English Christian apologist, one Irish Bishop, and one canny Scot.

That tradition begins with the claim that all knowledge begins with experience. That seems a simple enough claim, but in fact it already bristles with problems and unexpected implications. First of all, if conscious experience is the foundation of all knowledge, then no argument, however sophisticated, can ever deny the reality of such experience. Many people today speak of consciousness as the ‘hard problem’ for science. They mean that it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to see how consciousness can arise from the connection of neurons in the brain. Yet in saying that, they are assuming that there is no problem with the existence of neurons and of a physical brain. The problem is how consciousness could arise from the brain. The problem is so hard that some philosophers solve, or dissolve it, by denying that consciousness exists at all. That is the move that empiricism rules out. It is not just that you cannot plausibly deny that consciousness exists. Rather, conscious experiences are the most obviously real things we humans ever come across. They are the very starting points of knowledge. There is no problem of consciousness. It is just a fact, and the most basic fact there is.

There is a problem with how physical events in the brain seem to be so closely correlated with conscious experiences, and with what sort of correlation that could possibly be. But the belief that there are physical brains is based on conscious experience, plus the assumption that what we observe continues to exist when we are not observing it. That is a plausible assumption – though there are good reasons to doubt it – but it is precisely an assumption made because it enables us to make sense of our experiences. It cannot possibly lead us to say that what we are interpreting – our conscious experience - does not even exist.

There are two main points here. First, we cannot ever plausibly deny that conscious experiences are real. Second, those experiences need to be interpreted, with the aid of assumptions that we introduce to make sense of what might otherwise be just a confusing series of perceptions, sensations, thoughts, and feelings.

Our interpretations of experience lead us to speak of realities beyond what we experience, realities which are mediated by experience but not confined to experience. In this sense, the reality of an independently existing world of physical objects is transcendent to experience. It postulates what is beyond but is expressed in experience. So there is nothing odd in saying that human experiences are real, but they give us a sort of ‘mediated knowledge’ of things beyond but expressed in experience.

If you have the misfortune to possess a philosophical mind, you will naturally go on to ask what sort of things can be mediated in and through conscious experiences. To some people it may seem obvious that it is just the world of physical things that can be so mediated. It turns out, however, to be quite difficult to define what you mean by ‘physical’ things.

One thing you might try is to say that physical things are things located in space and time, with properties like mass and velocity. You do not have to deny that there are such things in order to wonder whether these are the only things that are mediated in experience. On reflection you might think that to say that beyond experience there are only located particles in space and time is a remarkably parsimonious view of the world. There seems to be a lot more that we experience than the mass, location, and momentum of particles. There is colour which gives life and vivacity to what we see, there are odours which please or revolt, tactile sensations with degrees of pleasure and pain, and sounds which excite or soothe. Or all these things purely subjective appearances which reflect nothing of objective reality?

The ‘objective physical world’ that some postulate seems to be a bare skeleton or framework for everything that is really important to lived experience, an abstraction from which all life and vivacity has been drained, a world where there might be the mathematical beauty of pure form, but where there is no sensuous beauty, no awe or terror or delight.

It is that idea of beauty that raises the possibility that there is more to objective reality than space, time, mass
and momentum. From the earliest records of human history, people have formed patterns of sound, colour, and language that seem to have an almost magical power to inspire feelings and intuitions of meaning. Of course feeling are subjective, in that they vary from person to person, and only exist in consciousness, as responses to what is perceived. But are some responses more appropriate than others, and may those responses grasp, in a way that only feeling can, something of the inner nature of what is perceived?

All experiences are subjective, inasmuch as they are parts of streams of consciousness that constitute the inner lives of individual and unique persons. But they are experiences of some objective reality, and that is why they constitute knowledge.

Thoughts can be more or less appropriate to their objects. We say that descriptions can be more or less adequate, more or less accurate, capturing more or less of the nature of the objects we perceive. Truth is a property of our words or thoughts, insofar as they manage to express the nature of things.

Can feelings, in somewhat the same way, be more or less appropriate to their objects? Perhaps there are qualities of objects that can only be apprehended by feeling. Indeed, thoughts and feelings may both be necessary to a full grasp of the nature of objective reality. We may grasp in thought the nature of a thing. But we may need to grasp in feeling the inner quality or the value of that thing.

Think of the artistic representation of a vase of flowers. In thought we may recognise what it is, what its dimensions are, and what techniques of painting have been used. But to appreciate it as a painting, to understand the artistic vision it conveys, and the peculiar and unique perception of this particular reality it conveys, requires a very specific artistic sensibility. Some people may lack that sensibility. Others may possess it to a remarkable degree, seeing depths of meaning that others may easily miss. Such sensibility can be taught, and though there is never just one way of responding to a painting, artistic taste can be cultivated, and exists in many different degrees.

It is much the same in music and literature. It is not pure logic that understands a Bach motet, though there is plenty of logic in Bach’s motets. It is the ability to enter into the spirit of the music, to be moved by its purity and serenity, to encounter in and through the sounds something that conveys something deeply meaningful, and yet beyond words to express.

For some empiricists all that is just emotional sentimentality, for experience gives nothing but the bare unfeeling facts. The early Wittgenstein, in the ‘Tractatus’, seems to have taken such a view of reality, and shallower spirits followed him in consigning all feeling to an irrelevant eddy on the surface of an unfeeling reality. But Wittgenstein later renounced such a view.

Is it not truer to say that we can apprehend objective values through feeling, instructed and appreciative sensibility, than to say that the whole world of painting, music, and literature is nothing much more than a set of subjective fantasies erected on a world that in itself contains no values at all, but only bare unfeeling facts?

My point is that feeling and thought together may provide an interpretation of experience that gives access to a dimension of reality that can only be known in and through specific experiences. It is in the arts that such experiences are most intensely focussed. Of course it is possible to regard music and art as simply diversions, or ways of passing the time – and quite a lot of what passes for art is actually like that. But composers and painters are not always seeking just to divert or entertain. They can also wish to convey a uniquely personal vision that will communicate something of what it is like to be in a world which reveals itself in and through the effort of creative discipline and activity. When we attend to art, we do not just wish to be entertained. We also wish to have our own perception of things extended and deepened. Bach’s St. Matthew Passion is not just a set of good tunes. The music seems to probe the depths of human experience, to convey the beauty and the tragedy of human life, and to deepen our perception of the human situation.

I am not suggesting that all art is spiritual or religious in some explicit sense. But I am suggesting that, at least
for many of us, great art tells us something about reality which cannot be conveyed in any other way. It lifts us above an egoistic concern for ourselves and our transitory pleasures, and takes us into a world where beauty alone is a supremely valuable object of attention.

To attend to music and art is to learn to direct our attention away from ourselves and to centre attention on what is worth-while for its own sake. The answer to the question, ‘Why should you learn to appreciate the music of Bach?’ is ‘Because it communicates intrinsic beauty; because it is supremely worth-while; because it expresses something of objective value’. Human creativity and skill is involved, and we rightly admire artistic originality and skill. But the skill reveals something of intrinsic value, something that demands our attention.

It is this notion of an intrinsic value that demands attention that distinguishes art from mere entertainment. The value is apprehended by discipline and skill, or sometimes by what we revealingly call ‘genius’, a gift of inspiration that seems almost superhuman or god-like. As we learn to appreciate art, we are taken beyond ourselves to the contemplation of something that is conveyed by sense-perceptions, but is not reducible just to a description of those perceptions. The perceptions become mediators of meaning, of values which have to be expressed in creatively patterned perceptions, but whose significance is not contained in those perceptions themselves.

To see art in this way is to see perceptions – whether visual, aural, or verbal - as mediators of transcendent and objective values. Those values do not exist independently of sense-experiences, as though they form a separate realm, a supernatural duplicate of the physical world somehow running parallel with it. Values exist and are essentially expressed in experience. They add a dimension of depth and meaning to experience. That is what can be called a ‘spiritual dimension’, a dimension which is both shaped and discerned by mental or spiritual activity, which is made real by disciplined and creative activity of mind.

Is this subjective? Well, its nature, and what is discerned, how fully it is discerned, and how it is interpreted, depends on the activity of mind. But is it purely subjective? It seems not, for it is a discernment of an objective dimension of reality. It is a discernment of objective value which demands attention, but which becomes actualised only insofar as it is realised in some consciousness.

From a philosophical point of view, this means that the experience of an objective reality is more than the experience of a world of physical objects. It is also experience of objective values, which exist as ideals which demand our attention, but which become realised in various ways and to various degrees in and through the creative activities and discernments of conscious minds. To continue with the example of Bach, surely one of the greatest creative composers, we can say that Bach strove to complete the St. Matthew Passion as a work which demanded to be written, whose shape almost imposed itself upon him, which was completely what it was meant to be, which almost wrote itself through him. And yet the work bore the unmistakeable imprint of his own technique and insight, and of the musical traditions which he inherited and transformed. Between these two poles of an objective ideal demanding realisation and a creative and original activity of mind which realises it in a uniquely personal way, lies the mystery and miracle of great art.

No-one has to see art in this way. This is a specific perspective on art, one which speaks of objective values of beauty and of the importance of individual creativity. It does not need to involve an idea of God, and many great artists had no particular inclination to believe in a personal supernatural being who demanded rituals of worship from them. But there is a way of seeing art which sees it as a matter of responding to demanding values of beauty, and that is, I think, a form of worship, of attention to what is of intrinsic value, and a creative act of response which seek to realise that value in a uniquely personal way.

Art, seen thus, is an important part of spirituality. It presupposes that experience is of a reality which contains objective demands and values. At its best, it inspires a practice and discipline which seeks to subordinate self-centred desires to the realisation of such values in a uniquely creative way. This may be an odd sort of religion, and I would not think it helpful to call it a religion at all. But it is spirituality. It presupposes a dimension of objective value which instructed experience can discern. It inspires a practice which seeks to realise those values in experience. It is evidence that a spiritual dimension exists and is central to the search for human well-being. It is a major strand of what can become a cumulative case for God.
Taken on its own, art, as the attention to forms of beauty, is only one aspect, however important, of human life and experience. As the Danish writer Soren Kierkegaard saw, the aesthetic dimension of life can give rise to a rather self-satisfied, elitist, and exclusive cultivation of refined taste. There are other dimensions of experience which complement and qualify this dimension of aesthetic value. There are many things other than beauty which are worth-while just for their own sake. Most people would agree, for example, that knowledge and understanding are worth-while, not just because they are useful for getting us things that we want, but because they are intrinsically good. They fulfill a distinctively human capacity, a natural inclination towards the truth.

Most people would probably agree that power, freedom, or the capacity to do things that we want to do, is intrinsically worth-while. The exercise of creative freedom is of value just in itself. Perhaps most obviously, achieving a state of happiness or well-being is something that is good for its own sake. These are just some of the states that we might say are intrinsically good.

But in saying that they are good, do we just mean that we happen to like them or prefer them? Or is there something more to it? We might want to say that such states are objectively good. That is, they are good whether or not we actually do prefer them or strive for them. If they are really objective values, then they may make a demand upon us to realise them in some form. Someone may agree that, in the abstract, understanding, freedom, and well-being are good and worth seeking. But they may be satisfied with a very small degree of knowledge or freedom, especially given the difficulty of learning and discipline that is required for increasing these goods. Someone may agree that the contemplation of beauty is good, and yet lack any inclination to pay attention to works of artistic excellence. Someone may agree that increasing knowledge is good, yet lack any inclination to gain new knowledge when the opportunity arises.

Perhaps at least it is different with pleasure and pain, however. It is plausible to say that most humans, indeed most sentient beings, would choose to avoid pain and choose pleasure if they could. Here, it seems, is a foundation for a simple morality. Choose pleasure, and avoid pain. That is certainly what sentient beings do. But are all sorts of pleasure of equal value, or are there some pleasures that are more worth-while than others, that we ought to seek, whether we feel like it or not.

The early British Utilitarian’s considered this question, and Jeremy Bentham famously said that ‘pushpin is a good as poetry’ – meaning that it doesn’t matter much what anyone does, play billiards or read poetry, as long as it doesn’t hurt others. John Stuart Mill disagreed, holding that mental pleasures were qualitatively superior to physical pleasures, whether or not people thought they were. And here is the crucial question: should a person do whatever happens to give them pleasure, or are there things that humans ought to do, whether they feel like it or not? If you say that some values are objective, you mean that there are states that are worthwhile, and ought to be pursued, even if individuals disagree.

So we might say that someone is wasting their talent for music, for example, if they do not practice and improve their technique. Or they are failing in their duty if they do not keep up to date with the latest legal requirements by study and application. If a person sits around watching TV all day and drinking every evening, would we say that is a good life, filled with pleasurable experiences? Or might we think that such a person is wasting their life? I am not trying to be judgmental about individuals here, and there are all sorts of mitigating factors that we would have to consider in particular cases. But the general point is that many people would think that there are certain distinctive qualities humans possess, and it is an obligation for individuals to cultivate and extend these at least to a reasonable degree. Such qualities would include the capacity for knowledge and understanding, the capacity for creating and appreciating works of art, literature, and music, the capacity for co-operating creatively with others in various projects, the capacity for acting compassionately to meet the needs of others, and the capacity for building relationships of loyalty and friendship with others.

We come to understand these distinctive qualities by reflection on the nature of human beings, and by recognising that humans are able to extend such capacities by effort and application, or to neglect them and opt for what may seem to be easier and simpler pleasures. This, of course, is broadly the distinction between ‘mental’ and ‘physical’ pleasures that Mill had in mind. It reflects the more ancient teaching of Aristotle that a fullfilled human life consists in the pursuit of distinctive human excellences, the virtues.

So far so good. Unfortunately, Aristotle added that human fulfilment (in which true happiness consists) is rarely achieved, and then only by a privileged few, for a short time, and will inevitably fade away. Indeed, Aristotle thought that only the leisureed elite of ancient Greece had any hope of happiness, and the vast masses of the
world were condemned to a sub-human existence, suitable only for minions, slaves, and women.

That does raise the question of whether such a difficult goal is worth all the effort needed to pursue it. Put in more modern and more brutal terms, is Aristotelian humanism only for a leisured elite, while the vast toiling masses of the world need something more like equality and justice, not a rather self-obsessed pursuit of comfortable virtues and of personal happiness? Perhaps pleasure is not quite so uncontentious a basis for morality as it may have seemed.

I do not accept these criticisms, since it is clearly possible both to be concerned for social justice and for personal virtue, and Aristotle was, in his own way. But they help to point out that aiming at perfection of mind as a means to happiness, and aiming at it as a demand inherent in the very structure of human being, are two very different things. There may be distinctive human capacities. But why should that fact make them obligatory to pursue?

For a traditional Christian, the answer is fairly clear. God created humans in the divine image – meaning that their distinctive capacities of creativity, appreciation, understanding, social co-operation, and extended sympathy reflect in a limited sphere some of the characteristics of God. The obligation to protect and realise these capacities was rooted in the purpose of God that humans should come to share in the divine nature by realising the divine ideal more fully in themselves. Objective obligation, in other words, is rooted in the purpose of God in creating humans so that they could grow into the divine image and likeness.

Take away God, and you take away any element of purpose or objectively given goal in human life. Why, then, should humans perfect their own natures if they do not wish to? Is there any place for the idea of objective demand in a completely non-religious world-view?

John Stuart Mill worried about this problem, and he thought that some sort of idea of God might well be the strongest basis for the humane morality of universal sympathy which he felt was right. If a true concern for human well-being is based on the obligation to perfect humanity in one's own person, on respecting humanity both in oneself and in others, and on the importance of human moral freedom and responsibility, is there any foundation in reality for such beliefs?

I suggest that the connection that is often made between spirituality and morality at this point is entirely apt. A spiritual view of humanity is that moral striving in virtue is central to the human project. It is not just an optional choice. It is founded in the nature of things. But how can this be, if there is no purpose or value in the universe apart from purposes and values that humans invent for themselves? Is there any place for objective and intrinsic values in a universe that is just composed of material particles and purposeless and blind laws of their interaction?

Just as in art it is plausible to say that there are objective values, standards of beauty, that place demands upon people in appropriate circumstances, so in human life it is plausible to say that there are objective values, obligations that demand action from people in specific situations.

Jean-Paul Sartre, who famously denied this in his early philosophy, used the example of someone who asks whether he should join the French Resistance to Nazi occupation, or stay at home to help his ailing mother. Sartre claimed that there is no objectively correct answer to the question, and used this example to say that there are no correct answers in morality at all. There are only personal choices. We invent ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. They are not objectively there, waiting to be discovered.

But what Sartre was really saying is that people often face difficult moral choices. There may be duties which conflict, and it may be very hard to say which path you should take. But it should be clear that it would be absolutely wrong for the son to do nothing, to walk away and neglect both his mother and his country, and say, ‘I choose to go on holiday’. Some choices are just immoral. And though there are many moral dilemmas, there are also some very clear moral obligations. Thus - to take the case that caused Sartre to change his mind about morality later in life, and to repudiate his early work, ‘Existentialism and Humanism’ - if you see a starving child by the roadside, and you have no pressing engagements to fulfil, and you are in a position to help, then you are obliged to do something to help. That situation, that experience, places an objective demand upon you, and if you turn away from it, to that extent you lessen your humanity.
So it is reasonable to think that in the moral life there are experiences of objective demand and obligation, and those experiences mediate knowledge of objectively existing values, which we do not invent, but which we may either recognise and respond to, or turn aside from. That is human moral freedom.

Some philosophers agree that these values do exist, but they do not need a God to impose them on you by some sort of divine threat or command. They just exist, and they define our humanity and our freedom. But I find the idea that values just exist as non-material entities that place demands upon us and help to define what sort of beings we are, almost wholly obscure. Where are such things supposed to be, and in what sense can they exist, in a world that is wholly unconscious and purposeless? I accept that ‘non-material entities’ is not quite the right expression here, but it is hard to think of another term that ascribes existence to something that is not material. Maybe we just have to accept that obscurity. But if experience is experience of an objective reality that contains, not only physical objects, but non-physical values, possibilities that demand realisation by us, then we exist in a world with a spiritual dimension. And it is a world with purpose, since it becomes our human purpose, not one that we invent but one that is inherent in the nature of things, to realise those values in a creative way. This is very far from a world without purpose or value, the world of hard-headed atheism.

This suggestion that values objectively exist in the world of reality that is known by us in experience is not in itself an argument for God. But it is evidence in experience that there is a transcendent depth to experience that mediates knowledge of a spiritual dimension. This can be the beginning of an understanding of what the word ‘God’ means, as the underlying reality of the physical world, containing intrinsic and objective values which define what humans can and should be. Such a beginning needs further philosophical development, and that is what I will attempt in my second lecture, in which I will defend a philosophy which was in the early twentieth century supreme in Britain, but has recently fallen on hard times, the philosophy of Idealism.

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