

10. TRANSCENDENT INTEGRATION

10.1 GOD AS THE OBJECT AND PURPOSE OF SEARCH: The **meaning of life** is a philosophical question concerning the significance of life or existence in general. It can also be expressed in different forms, such as "Why are we here?", "What is life all about?", and "What is the purpose of existence?" It has been the subject of much philosophical, scientific, and theological speculation throughout history. There have been a large number of proposed answers to these questions from many different cultural and ideological backgrounds.

The meaning of life is in the philosophical and religious conceptions of existence, social ties, consciousness, and happiness, and borders on many other issues, such as symbolic meaning, ontology, value, purpose, ethics, good and evil, free will, the existence of one or multiple gods, conceptions of God, the soul, and the afterlife. Scientific contributions focus primarily on describing related empirical facts about the universe, exploring the context and parameters concerning the 'how' of life. Science also studies and can provide recommendations for the pursuit of well-being and a related conception of morality.

An alternative, humanistic approach poses the question "What is the meaning of *my* life?" The value of the question pertaining to the purpose of life may coincide with the achievement of ultimate reality, or a feeling of oneness, or even a feeling of sacredness

Historically and still today many people feel that humankind was created by a supernatural entity called God, that God had an intelligent purpose in creating humankind, and that this intelligent purpose is the 'meaning of life'.

Here is not the place to go through the various arguments for and against the existence of God. Suffice to say that many people who believe in God would admit that they do not really know what God's purpose might be, nor that it would necessarily be particularly meaningful. For example, the second Law of Thermodynamics states that entropy increases up to the point at which equilibrium is reached, and God's purpose in creating us and, indeed, all of nature, might simply have been to catalyse this process. If our God-given purpose is to act as super-efficient heat dissipaters, then this purpose is almost as bad as no purpose at all.

In fact, one might argue that having no God-given or pre-determined purpose is better than having any sort of pre-determined purpose at all (even a more traditional and uplifting one such as serving the will of God or improving our

karma) because it frees us to be the authors of our own purpose or purposes, and so to lead truly dignified and meaningful lives. In other words, even if God exists, and even if God had an intelligent purpose in creating humankind, we do not know what this purpose is and, whatever it is, we would much rather be free to determine our own purpose or purposes.

Some might object that not to have a pre-determined purpose is, really, not to have any purpose at all. However, this is to believe (1) that for something to have a purpose, it must have been created with that purpose in mind, and (2) that something that was created with a purpose in mind must necessarily have that very purpose for which it was created. Last summer, I visited Château-Neuf-du-Pape in the Southern Rhone where I picked up a beautiful rounded stone called a *galet* from one of the vineyards, took it back to England, and put it to excellent use as a book-end. The purpose of these stones in the vineyard is to absorb the heat from the sun during the daytime and then to release it during the night time. However, *galets* were not created with this or any other purpose in mind. Even if *galets* were created with a purpose in mind, then this purpose was almost certainly not (1) to make great wine, (2) to serve as book-ends, or (3) to be beautiful. That same evening over some supper, I had my wine-loving friends to blind-taste a bottle of claret that I had brought along from England. Unfortunately, I did not have a decanter to hand, so I masked the identity of the wine by slipping the bottle into one of my (clean) dark blue socks. Unlike the *galet*, the sock had been created with a purpose in mind, even if this purpose was a very different one from the one that it eventually found.

Some might also or otherwise object that talk about the purpose of life is neither here nor there because life is merely a prelude to some form of eternal afterlife and this is, if you like, its purpose. But (1) it is not at all clear that there is or even can be some form of eternal afterlife that involves the survival of the personal ego. (2) Even if there is an eternal afterlife, living for ever is not a meaning in itself and so the question arises, what is the meaning of the eternal afterlife? If the eternal afterlife has a predetermined purpose, again, we do not know what this purpose is and, whatever it is, we would much rather be free to determine our own purpose or purposes, which we can just as well do in this life. (3) It is not just that reliance on an eternal afterlife merely postpones the question of life's purpose, but also that it prevents us from determining a purpose or purposes for what may well be the only life that we do have. (4) If one believes that it is the brevity or finiteness of human life that lends it shape or meaning, then an eternal afterlife cannot, by definition, have any purpose.

The real point here is that whether or not God exists, whether or not God has a purpose for us, and whether or not there is an afterlife, we should strive to give meaning to our lives. For unless we can be free to determine our own purpose or purposes, our life may, at worst, have no purpose at all, and, at best, only some unfathomable pre-determined purpose that is not of our choosing. The great philosopher Plato once defined a human being as an animal, biped, featherless, and with broad nails, but a much better definition that he gave was simply this, 'A being in search of meaning.'

10.2 FACTORS OF A SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE: A **religious experience** (sometimes known as a spiritual experience, sacred experience, or mystical experience) is a subjective experience which is interpreted within a religious framework. The concept originated in the 19th century, as a defense against the growing rationalism of western society. William James popularized the concept.

Many religious and mystical traditions see religious experiences (particularly that knowledge that comes with them) as revelations caused by divine agency rather than ordinary natural processes. They are considered real encounters with God or gods, or real contact with higher-order realities of which humans are not ordinarily aware.

Skeptics or scientists may hold that religious experience is an evolved feature of the human brain amenable to normal scientific study. The commonalities and differences between religious experiences across different cultures have enabled scholars to categorize them for academic study.

Origins

The notion of "religious experience" can be traced back to William James, who used a term called "religious experience" in his book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The origins of the use of this term can be dated further back.

In the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, several historical figures put forth very influential views that religion and its beliefs can be grounded in experience itself. While Kant held that moral experience justified religious beliefs, John Wesley in addition to stressing individual moral exertion thought that the religious experiences in the Methodist movement (paralleling the Romantic Movement) were foundational to religious commitment as a way of life.

Wayne Proudfoot traces the roots of the notion of "religious experience" to the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), who argued that religion is based on a feeling of the infinite. The notion of "religious experience" was used by Schleiermacher and Albert Ritschl to defend religion against the growing scientific and secular critique, and defend the view that human (moral and religious) experience justifies religious beliefs.

Such religious empiricism would be later seen as highly problematic and was — during the period in-between world wars — famously rejected by Karl Barth. In the 20th century, religious as well as moral experience as justification for religious beliefs still holds sway. Some influential modern scholars holding this liberal theological view are Charles Raven and the Oxford physicist/theologian Charles Coulson.

The notion of "religious experience" was adopted by many scholars of religion, of which William James was the most influential.

Criticism

The notion of "experience" has been criticised. Robert Sharf points out that "experience" is a typical Western term, which has found its way into Asian religiosity via western influences. The notion of "experience" introduces a false notion of duality between "experiencer" and "experienced", whereas the essence of kensho is the realisation of the "non-duality" of observer and observed. "Pure experience" does not exist; all experience is mediated by intellectual and cognitive activity. The specific teachings and practices of a specific tradition may even determine what "experience" someone has, which means that this "experience" is not the *proof* of the teaching, but a *result* of the teaching. A pure consciousness without concepts, reached by "cleaning the doors of perception", would be an overwhelming chaos of sensory input without coherence.

Definitions

William James' definition

Psychologist and Philosopher William James described four characteristics of religious / mystical experience in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. According to James, such an experience is:

- **Transient** — the experience is temporary; the individual soon returns to a "normal" frame of mind. It is outside our normal perception of space and time.
- **Ineffable** — the experience cannot be adequately put into words.

- **Noetic** — the individual feels that he or she has learned something valuable from the experience. Gives us knowledge that is normally hidden from human understanding.
- **Passive** — the experience happens to the individual, largely without conscious control. Although there are activities, such as meditation that can make religious experience more likely, it is not something that can be turned on and off at will.

Norman Habel's definition

Habel defines religious experiences as the structured way in which a believer enters into a relationship with, or gains an awareness of, the sacred within the context of a particular religious tradition (Habel, O'Donoghue and Maddox: 1993). Religious experiences are by their very nature preternatural; that is, out of the ordinary or beyond the natural order of things. They may be difficult to distinguish observationally from psychopathological states such as psychoses or other forms of altered awareness (Charlesworth: 1988).

Not all preternatural experiences are considered to be religious experiences. Following Habel's definition, psychopathological states or drug-induced states of awareness are not considered to be religious experiences because they are mostly not performed within the context of a particular religious tradition.

Moore and Habel identify two classes of religious experiences: the immediate and the mediated religious experience (Moore and Habel: 1982).

- **Mediated** — In the mediated experience, the believer experiences the sacred through mediators such as rituals, special persons, religious groups, totemic objects or the natural world (Habel et al.: 1993).
- **Immediate** — The immediate experience comes to the believer without any intervening agency or mediator. The deity or divine is experienced directly

Richard Swinburne's definition

In his book *Faith and Reason*, the philosopher Richard Swinburne formulated five categories into which all religious experiences fall:

- **Public** — a believer 'sees God's hand at work', whereas other explanations are possible e.g. looking at a beautiful sunset
- **Public** — an unusual event that breaches natural law e.g. walking on water
- **Private** — describable using normal language e.g. Jacob's vision of a ladder
- **Private** — indescribable using normal language, usually a mystical experience e.g. "white did not cease to be white, nor black cease to be black, but black became white and white became black."

- **Private** — a non-specific, general feeling of God working in one's life.

Swinburne also suggested two principles for the assessment of religious experiences:

- **Principle of Credulity** — with the absence of any reason to disbelieve it, one should accept what appears to be true e.g. if one sees someone walking on water, one should believe that it is occurring.
- **Principle of Testimony** — with the absence of any reason to disbelieve them, one should accept that eyewitnesses or believers are telling the truth when they testify about religious experiences