

Essay

On Atheist Spirituality Part I: A Short Story, Good Life and Spiritual Poverty

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Abstract

In this series of essays, I explore and discuss spiritualization of materialistic atheism in support of Andre Comte-Sponville. These essays are further dedicated to Marie-Louise Nykamp. This essay contains: A Short Story; Much More Wrong Than ...; Good Life ...; and The Poor Shall Always Be with Us?

A Short Story

When I was a small boy, about two years old, on occasion, I had some nightmares. One morning I mentioned that to my Mother, and she replied, in a most natural matter of course manner, as if it had been about a simple and trivial issue, that next time, when I would again have such a nightmare, I should simply remember that I was dreaming, that all it would only be in a dream, and then I should just wake up ...

Since my Mother's reply came so instantly, smoothly, and without the least emotion, let alone dramatization, I simply took it as such ...

And next time, when a nightmare came upon me during my dream, I simply did, and yes, I managed rather naturally to do, what my Mother had told me to do ...

And never ever I would again have nightmares for more than a mere moment, before I would manage to wake up from them ...

Later, nightmares would, so to say, even avoid me completely ...

On occasion, and sometime even more often, we feel during our waking hours as if we were in the middle of a nightmare ...

Yes, as the saying has it : life is not a picnic !

And it really can get so much worse ...

Well then, is there some way recalling, even if rather vaguely so, the story with my early childhood nightmares ?

Could we possibly wake up - during our waking hours - to the realization that the respective horror does not, and in fact, simply cannot happen to who we really are ?

But then, who really are we ?

Of course, with few exceptions if at all, we always have some ideas about our own identity, about who we are ...

And needless to say, so do people who know us, or rather, believe to know us ...

And so often, we are quite at variance with what such people happen to think that we are ...

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Yet, we are hardly at all contesting the validity of what we think that we ourselves are ...

Well, it is perhaps high time that we would have a better look at the whole issue of who we are, who we really are ...

And if we may once in a blue Moon try to do so, well then, where and how would we start it ?

Much More Wrong Than ...

Another short story may, perhaps, help

Decades earlier, when I was still young, I happened to have a lady friend of considerable inborn gifts and distinction ...

And yet, for some years, I had to struggle in getting along with her ...

A main problem would be that she would invest all of her impressive energies in one venture or another, and pursue them as if nothing less than the Ninth Heaven was waiting for here at their end ...

Needless to say, each and every time, she would after some time and the expenditure of a lot of energy give up on the respective venture, and do so upon a sudden intuition that it was not the real thing ...

Having witnessed her on quite a number of such occasions, I could no longer help it, and had to deliver her the following comment :

”My dear X, you happen to have an unusually strong memory of what one may call the Original Bliss ...

Except that your memory of that bliss is far more wrong, than strong ...”

And as you may guess it, and regardless of my intentions, that comment was to be the end of our relationship ...

Good Life ...

Yes indeed : the Original Bliss ...

The bliss we all have a memory of ...

The bliss we so often feel like having fallen out of in some way or another ...

The bliss we all try so hard to re-enter ...

Leibniz, a most remarkable German philosopher, contemporary with Newton and co-author of Calculus, considered that ”This is the best of all possible Worlds”, and saw this statement as the most important idea he had formulated and cherished ...

Does that tell you anything at all about what good life may ever mean, and be ?

Good life ...

After all, is good life not the topmost aim of everybody among us ?

And as such, has it not been the subject of wisdom literature across several continents and millennia ?

Various religions also have for ages claimed to promote it, and in doing so, still keep competing with their respective narratives in trying to convince us to join in ...

And competing they did indeed, and some of them still do so nowadays, and do so even by extreme forms of violence both to their own, as to the others ...

On the other hand, in our days, and needless to say, so amusingly, a rather universal idea of good life has taken firmly hold of much of humankind. And across the largest possible spectrum, including the homeless and multi-billionaires, as well as the criminal, we prove to have just about the same idea of what a good life is supposed to be all about ...

Of course, some would like one type of luxury car, while others would much prefer a quite different one ...

And so across the whole range of delights, starting with food, drinks, clothes, house, and all of the rest ... Yet, except for such differences, the very nature of good life is seen just about being the same by nearly everybody ranging from destitutes to ultra rich, as well as those in between ...

And then, does such an incredible universality mean something relevant ?
And if it may, indeed, happen to do so, then what that may be ?

Could it be that, at last, we humans have indeed managed to identify what good life is ?
Could it be that the efforts in this regard of, for instance, a Plato in his book "The Republic", did finally come to fruition, even if in a rather radically different ways than foreseen ?

Or rather, it may not mean much more than that we human have never ceased to chase good life, and still keep doing so ...

And also, that we do know very deeply - even if so deeply that we do not quite know that we know it - that good life can only be the same for all of us, since in its essence, no matter how elusive to so many, there is indeed only one way of life which is good life ...

And in order to try to give some hint how much we may need some redirecting in our usual vision of good life, here is a Hassidic story which can be seen as a more detailed presentation of the mentioned fundamental idea of Leibniz :

"When God created the World, He consulted with the holy men, and He created the world for the sake of holy men."

And in case anyone may find such a statement shockingly incredible, or incredibly nave, if not in fact merely ridiculous, and as such, nothing but a silly wishful thinking, well, let us add that the same Hassidic tradition sees Creation as no less than a permanent, ever ongoing venture, as a never ending action of God ...

Therefore, according to them, the World is recreated by God each and every moment, and is done so in permanent consultation with holy men, and for the sake of holy men ...

And then, returning to Leibniz, to the extent that one may find this World as not being the best among all the possible ones, well, one may actually do not much more by having such a view, than express the extent to which one may happen to be removed from being a holy man ...

So then, one may ask : what may it mean to be a holy man ?

Of course, we have never lacked in those who were most eager to give their specific answers ...

And such answers, with few exceptions if ever, tended to be about the destination, the final state which, once reached, makes one into a holy man ...

Well, perhaps, any better kind of answer should rather be different, and only be about two issues : first, that one should stand up and start moving in the directions of becoming a holy man, and second, in which directions one should perhaps avoid moving, and in which other directions one may hopefully

try to move ...

Of course, many may quite instantly associate the term "holy man" with one or another religion, and thus be thoroughly put off by it ...

Well, there is no need for such a reaction ...

Indeed, the more appropriate, even if less frequently used term would be that of "whole man", or even "more whole man" ...

And as so often, the term "man" also includes that of "woman" ...

But now, if we leave all such thought aside, and simply have a look around, we may find an truly extraordinary fact :

Nowadays, by the time one reaches the age of about ten, one - and this means just about everyone - knows absolutely well what good life is supposed to mean ...

And furthermore, one is so utterly and ultimately certain about that knowledge that nothing and nobody could ever arise even the slightest doubt in this regard ...

And is this not but an instance of ultimate justice in the world ?

And ultimate justice which, even if it may not exactly make this into the best of all possible worlds, it nevertheless endows just about everybody right from one's early teenage with the utterly clear and firm knowledge of the world ?

Descartes had some four centuries ago, and before Leibniz, noted that at least with respect to one very important issue there was, indeed, a remarkable justice in the world. Yes, he said, he never met anyone to say that he had enough money, power, influence, or respect, or that he was looking nice enough, he was strong and healthy enough. On the other hand, he never met anybody either who would say that he did not have enough mind ...

Well, nowadays, we happen to live in such blessed time that even young teenagers are already endowed of the most perfect knowledge of what good life is all about ...

The rest, of course, is merely about how to get it ...

And, please, don't you come and tell us that, in fact, we may not quite know what it is, even if time and again so many and many more of us would never get it ...

It may, indeed, be quite amusing to see the human story on our Planet Earth somewhat from the outside ...

A Shakespeare, for instance, wrote dozens of outstanding plays, chose the actors and directed many of them, so that his audience may in some ways have such a look from the outside at the human story, and hopefully learn ...

Well, let us imagine for a moment - even if we happen to confess being atheists and practicing nothing short of a cheerful desperation - that there is God, He made us, and He keeps watching us ...

And if it may, indeed, be so, then is such a God not so immensely better than any Shakespeare at running the human show ?

Just think of it : the only thing such a God ever does is to endow His creatures with quite an overwhelming desire for individual autonomy !

And, lo and behold, then such a God does not have to write one single play, not even one lonely line in such a play. And even less He is in need to direct plays ...

No, not at all !

Indeed, our rather insanely pursued individual autonomy will make each of us keep for ever more writing our own play and doing so all on our own, and o of course, keep for evermore trying as well to direct it all alone ...

On the other hand, if we happen to make one single mistake, well, that God is there to punish us relentlessly ...

Would you - regardless of being gifted as a Shakespeare, or not - not prefer to watch such a show, one in which all you have to do is to endow your creatures with that immense sense of individual autonomy, and then simply sit back and see how they mess through most of their lives ...

And whenever they do, as they will of course not be able to avoid doing, slap a punishment upon them ?

Well, even if you happen to be an atheists of the cheerful desperate kind, you may, I am afraid, hardly be able to avoid the thought that such a ... highly non-Shakespearian play ... could indeed be going on ...

The Poor Shall Always Be with Us ?

Poverty among us humans happens to have many forms and a variety of levels. A most obvious form is that which usually goes with the label of material poverty, and much of the efforts of modern societies have been focused on diminishing, if not eradicating it. Yet, universal literature ever since ancient times is mostly about various other, and no less awful and fatal forms of individual poverty, the victims of which are persons sufficiently privileged to be free from any form of that rather raw and so called material one. And persons who happen to belong to the middle or yet more privileged classes of our own modern societies can, and do show us time and again that freedom from material poverty does so often only open up the doors, and so many possible doors, to a surprising range of more subtle forms of poverty, forms which typically prove to be rather intractable in the individuals affected. Indeed, such more subtle and less raw forms of poverty fall just about completely outside of realms within the range of economic, social or political measures and actions. And in our modern societies it appears that all what the persons affected by them can try to do is to appeal to the services of psychologists, psychiatrists, and in more dramatic cases, of lawyers litigating the resulting unsavoury conflicts. Of course, a large variety of drugs, in addition to the traditional ones, as well as gurus, coaches, and other alleged healers are also solicited to help. Not to mention the ever expanding so called self-help literature on the psychology shelves of bookshops. And yet, the intractability of the myriad forms of poverties more subtle than the material one keeps evermore staring so blatantly straight into our face ...

Traditionally, we have for long ages used a rather simple and also simplifying terminology trying to single out that division between material poverty, and on the other hand, all other more subtle forms of poverty which can befall a human individual. And often, the more subtle forms have been seen as being to a considerable extent but expressions of what has sometime gone by the term of spiritual poverty. Furthermore, and for a couple of millennia by now, the human institution of religion, with its various incarnations, has been seen as the way to deal with such spiritual poverty.

The Catholic Church, for instance, had found it necessary back in its early days nearly thousand five hundred years ago to list the so called seven deadly sins, among which pride was to be seen as the deadliest, and at the root of all the other ones. However, the quite earlier Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament is already also busy with setting up such a list ...

The effects and consequences of such approaches are well known, and they have proved to be quite a

mixed blessing. Altogether, the overall record of religions is not without its major blemishes, and many of them are still there even in our days ...

Consequently, in modern times, a large and growing number of individuals, in particular in Western societies, have simply and quite radically overreacted by totally rejecting not only religion, but the very concept of spiritual poverty, seeing so often in such a total rejection a rather instant and complete solution to all forms of poverty beyond the material one.

“The book of *Atheist Spirituality*” recently published by Andre Comte-Sponville is a deeply felt and moving appeal for a reconsideration of the issue of spiritual poverty. And it is even more convincing due to the fact that the author himself has for long set aside the ways of religion, yet managed to do so without much of the all too pervasive modern overreaction.

What appears, however, to be a problem with the mentioned book is precisely the effect of a thorough commitment to atheism on the part of its author, a commitment which - rather paradoxically, and certainly in spite of the author’s intention - may in fact manifest itself as yet another form of religion, this time as some sort of a, shall we say, secular one ...

And then, the following lines aim to present a dedicated support for the intended message of Comte-Sponville, and in doing so, try to avoid any specific a priori commitment which may possibly be construed as some form of religion, except of course for a commitment to approach rationally the issue of more subtle forms of poverty which so often befall individuals privileged enough to be free from its material form ...

As for the structure of the following lines, it may be more appropriate and also useful to avoid that of a free standing text or tractate, and instead, to present them as a succession of commentaries which may arise one after the other, and not necessarily in the order one reads the book of Comte-Sponville. In this way, it may be convenient to have the book of Comte-Sponville at hand, read it before reading the following lines, and then re-read it together with the comments presented in the sequel.

Jesus Christ, according to the Gospel, is supposed to have stated that the poor shall always be with us ...

Well, either that may indeed be the case, or not, it need not mean that nothing at all should be attempted in order to ameliorate the situation. And as so well and so widely documented by now, poverty is not at all reduced to its material form alone. During recent decades, hundreds of millions, if not in fact, a few billions of us humans have been lifted out from material poverty, or are in the respective process. And what so often, and apparently so inevitably happens to such persons among us is that, quite instantly, they become affected by more subtle, yet seemingly intractable variants of poverty ...

Can, then, anything, anything at all be done about that ?

Can one, indeed, try to address what has so far so much escaped a modern thorough going attention, a more serious and possibly effective attention ?

An attention which may at last start to focus on all those countless and more subtle forms of poverty, forms beyond the material one ?

And then, if we indeed try do so, what can be more appropriate than formulate certain questions ? After all, how can one ever get to answers, let alone, solutions, if not by first asking some questions ?

Hopefully, questions of a more appropriate kind ?

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