Essay

On Atheist Spirituality Part II: The Approach, Starting Proposition and End of Time

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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: The Approach To Be Followed; Three Questions followed by ... another Four Ones ...; A Few Starting Propositions; the End of Time; and Twice Unknown

The Approach To Be Followed

One could simply follow the chapters in Comte-Sponville's book, which for brevity, we shall mention as C-S, and present certain comments. Even simpler, perhaps, one could focus on the last brief chapter in C-S, namely, Conclusion Love and Truth, and comment on the various statements there.

However, as always, comments are not emerging from some sort of void. Instead, they are expressions of certain more or less constituted and systematic views. And then, it may be more conducive to the understanding of any kind of possible comments to start by a certain relatively brief elaboration of their underlying views.

We shall, therefore, attempt such a brief elaboration in the next few sections, before starting to comment on C-S, and do so chapter after chapter ...

Let us, however, mention once more that the aim of the following comments is to support the intended message of C-S. And we try to do so by illustrating with the comments to follow that the essence of the message of C-S is compatible with underlying views that are quite different, yet not less credible ... In other words, the intended message of C-S is not so much in need of an underlying atheism, or for that matter, of any other form of "ism", let alone of an assumed, or rather, alleged cheerful desperation ... And it may, indeed, be high time that, whenever we may try to deliver an important and fundamental message like that intended in C-S, we may be more careful and relaxed about clinging to some underlying views, views which end up by being so specific and particular, as to keep for evermore dividing us humans in conflicting groups, conflicting often in rather deadly manner, as it has happened time and again throughout our history, and regrettably, still keeps happening in our own time ...

Three Questions followed by ... another Four Ones ...

A remarkable feature of C-S is to formulate up front three questions that summarize the author's concerns, as well as his pursuit, namely :

- 1. Can we do without religion ?
- 2. Does God exist ?

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3. Can there be an atheist spirituality ?

An issue which arises with these questions from the beginning is the terminology they use, a terminology that simply takes for granted certain more widespread and traditional views which in fact are a rather confusing and arbitrary mix of various religious, or on the contrary, religion rejectionist positions. Specifically, not a few categories are created in violation of Occam's razor, such as agnostic, atheist, religion, God, spirituality, sacred, supernatural, transcendental, immanent, faith, belief, and so on. Based on that, a sophisticated analysis is given the chance to develop. And the possibility is open for missing a deeper, more fundamental approach, one that, hopefully, is also clarifying by its simplicity.

Here, such an approach is attempted with the help of the following four questions :

1. Do you believe that whatever in Creation which may be relevant to your life is already accessible to your awareness ?

2. And if not - which is most likely the case - then do you believe that it may become accessible during the rest of your life ?

3. And if not - which again is most likely the case - then do you believe that you should nevertheless try some sort of two way interactions with all that which may never ever become accessible to your awareness, yet may nevertheless be relevant to your life ?

4. And if yes - which most likely is the minimally wise approach - then how do you intend to get into a two way interaction with all those realms which may be relevant to your life, yet about which your only awareness can be that they shall never ever be within your awareness, no matter how long you may live ?

And what are we in fact talking here about ?

Simple, very simple indeed.

Just think about the electro-magnetic waves, for instance, which we humans did not at all know to exist until the mid 1800s. Well, today, your mobile phone is essentially using them, and so does your radio and TV, as well as your laptop when connected wireless to the Internet. Yet you as a human being, when without such devices, are in no way directly, physically aware of them, in spite of the fact that they do all the time penetrate your body, and actually, can penetrate thick walls as well, among them those of your house. Fortunately however, and much unlike all our ancestors during countless earlier millennia, we, or at least some of us, can mentally be aware of them. And thanks to those relatively few among us who are so, and moreover, are aware of them in a sufficiently rigorous and scientifically based way, we can easily benefit from suitable devices which make those electro-magnetic waves so useful in our everyday lives.

More generally, modern science, and the technology based on it, keep bringing into our awareness more and more realms which, we, humans, have earlier had absolutely no awareness whatsoever about. Indeed, it is an important feature of our times that by far the vast majority of what is know in various branches of modern science and technology has become known as recently as during the preceding one or two generations. And that process of massive discovery of new realms with which we can, and do, establish relevant and useful two way interactions keeps going on ...

But then, of course, it would be naive at best to consider that the discovery of ever new relevant realms is strictly limited to those accessible to modern science and technology. After all, for millennia, there have been a variety of human endeavours in which important, and in fact, fundamental roles were played by occasional discoveries of new realms. To mention a few, we can recall the discovery of agriculture some ten millennia ago, or of architecture, not to mention art which may go back, as some cave paintings testify, to tens of thousands of years.

What is new in human experience is the massive process of discovery of ever new and never before dreamt about realms of major relevance which modern science and technology keep bringing forth in our times ...

In this regard, until recently, very few more relevant realms, if any at all, happened to enter the awareness of humans during any given generation. Not to mention that the vast majority of humans have not had any kind of a more formal and systematic education, and spent all of their short and poor lives within a given rigidly fixed set of circumstances which tended to remain quite the same over a number of generations.

It is, thus, not surprising that possible alternatives to such a life could so easily end up being seen as rather transcendental or supernatural realms, realms which did not seem to have much, if any at all, everyday relevance since they could not be directly experienced ...

Such were the ways which would encourage visions of heaven, a realm which could not be anything else but the total, complete and absolute opposite of hell, of that hell suggested by one's rather hellish everyday hopeless life ...

Altogether, the effect was that few, if any truly new relevant realms may ever become a general enough experience during the life time even of several successive generations. Thus the divide between what happened to be considered as real, true and existent, and on the other hand, what may possibly be seen or imagined as ever becoming so kept remaining just about absolutely and for evermore fixed over generations.

And then, more fundamental questions, when on rare occasions they may at all arise, were not seen within the dynamic terms of an ongoing flux of new realms entering the public awareness. Instead, they were merely confined to a rigidly fixed framework, one that would remain quite the same form many a generation, and then further being reinforced by tradition and authority, and rather as a rule, also supported, or at least not challenged, by a large majority in the respective societies ...

To given an example, let us recall that Giordano Bruno seems to be the first in the more recent Western tradition to come up with the idea that the universe is infinite, and in particular, that the Sun is but one of the infinitely many stars out there, in the sky. And for that idea, in 1600, at the age of fifty two, he was burned alive by the Catholic Church, on Campo dei Fiori, a market place near to Piazza Navona in the central part of the city of Rome, in Italy.

This is precisely why old and traditional formulations of certain fundamentally important questions may nowadays benefit from a reformulation. And the four above questions that follow the three questions in C-S are attempting to do that ...

Now it may be objected that the way those four questions are formulated is too much, so to say, human individual centered, and as such, focused on what in philosophy goes by the names of gnoseology and epistemology, that is, the issue of the ways of knowing, or of being or becoming aware of reality. Indeed, those four questions do not so much seem to focus on ontology which, traditionally, is the first philosophical issue, namely, the issue of what exists, or the issue of what is real.

Well, the fact is that those four questions are even more focused on pragmatics than on anything at

all, that is, on the issue of practical use and benefit to be achieved by the human individual. And in fact, we should not miss to note that a traditional first focus on ontology, followed by one on gnoseology and epistemology, also has a definite ulterior pragmatic aim, unless one is merely involved in the pursuit of a more learned and sophisticated version of a crosswords puzzle game, a pursuit which neither C-S, nor the following lines are aiming at ...

As for placing the human individual at the center of those four questions, well, we happen to think that a strong and viable social pyramid cannot be assembled from weak stones, no matter what approaches may be attempted in its construction and maintenance. And therefore, what may indeed come first and foremost is to try to attain to a state of affairs where a sufficient number of sufficiently enlightened human individuals may be present ...

As for enlightened human individuals, a well known Zen-Buddhist saying may be useful :

"In order to become enlightened, one must be enlightened."

Well, such a saying may remind one of that mercilessly dour and much disputed Calvinist doctrine of predestination ...

And yet, when it comes to such fundamentals, one may to a good extent be already within realms beyond time and space ...

So much therefore for any kind of predestination ...

And beyond time and space, well, lots of fundamental issues fade away, or at least, take completely different meanings and forms ...

And that may as well regard poverty, poverty in all its possible forms, levels or variants ...

Including the endless forms of individual poverty of not being sufficiently enlightened ...

As for becoming enlightened, well, things are not exactly so bad or so difficult. After all, there is also the saying :

"In order to become enlightened, you have to get from here to here ..."

And if one happened to believe that this would only indicate the spatial proximity of the "land of enlightenment", one could in fact complete the above saying as follows :

"In order to become enlightened, all you may have to do is to get from the here and now to the here and now ..."

And as may be seen in the sequel, the main difficulty is indeed not so much related to space, as rather to time. To our usual perception of it ...

A Few Starting Propositions

It is hard, if not in fact, quite impossible to pre-empt the message intended in these lines by a small number of propositions which may as well assume the role of a summary or conclusions. And yet, such propositions may, among others, serve as warnings concerning rather customary failures in approaching such fundamental issues as those dealt with in C-S.

The few propositions which follow aim to provide a first and brief background to the four questions above, a background that may help in clarifying their meaning and relevance.

First, perhaps, we should be most careful not to end up in the dead end of one or another belief, no matter how elaborate, learned or sophisticated the process we went through prior to falling for evermore for that belief. Indeed, the history of humanity is full of all sorts of such beliefs often shared for quite long and by so many. And that fact alone should be a most potent warning, since nearly all such beliefs were later abandoned, or even worse, proven to be trivially wrong.

One blatant example of such a belief, mentioned in some detail later, was that our Planet Earth is flat and immobile at the very center of the universe.

When one faces fundamental questions, such as about life and death, the nature and the aim of Creation, the existence or otherwise, of a Creator, and so on, one is indeed facing issues which, quite likely, cannot ever be answered in a more credible manner within the everyday human experience and knowledge. And then, as if to satisfy some psychological urges - among them, to get rid of the discomfort of living for long with question marks related to important issues - one may fall for the dubious comfort of one or another specific belief. In our own days, the extreme fanaticism, able more than on occasion to drive young privileged people into suicidal terrorism, as it happened on 9/11, appears to be proportionate with one's considerable weakness in living with anything less than the illusion of absolute certainty regarding fundamentals. And the extreme aberrant nature of such cases should not blind one to the fact that far more widespread lesser forms of such a weakness can still push so many into falling for some mere belief which is not, and simply cannot be validated, except for the illusion of comfort it may deliver ...

Second, the dead end nature of any such belief should be obvious. And in our times, when so many relevant new realms are brought to our awareness, festering for ever more in a given belief seems quite ridiculous, even if by not doing so one may place oneself into a somewhat uncomfortable mental and emotional, or altogether, existential situation. And yet, it may be worth trying to live with the minimal courage to do so. And one of the immediate, permanent and main advantages of such a courage is that one is free from the risk of having to abandon one's given belief, with all the upheavals such an event can usually cause. Furthermore, one is free from having to keep justifying to oneself one's specific belief, and one is also free from an ever lingering fear, suspicion or insecurity about the validity of one's belief, even if one may experience all that less than fully consciously ...

However, what is far far more important than any possible advantage resulting from such a minimal courage, is the realism of accepting the fact that human existence is indeed essentially vulnerable. And it is so not only in its physical aspects, but also related to the human understanding of fundamental issues, thus placing us humans in a situation where we must live with quite a number of question marks related to such issues.

And it should be quite clear that human civilization is not mainly about comfort. And it is certainly not even about a physical one, since so many of us who do no longer earn a living by hard physical work are quite aware of the need to do rather uncomfortable physical exercises, in order to preserve our health. What should be even more obvious, however, is that civilization is not about emotional, mental, or altogether, existential comfort either. Indeed, such comforts indulged in by an individual can and do lead to a slower or faster decay and degeneration, while indulging in them on the level of a whole society is well known to be equally dangerous for the society in its entirety.

And then, what is human civilization all about ?

Well, among others, it is about securing a way of life in which individuals are no longer subject to the fate of animals in a jungle, a fate in which arbitrary, and often deadly physical dangers are most of the time present. Thus when living in human civilization we are not supposed to be enjoying an ever growing comfort covering absolutely all aspects of our lives.

No, we are only supposed to live more and more free from the arbitrariness of dangerous physical challenges. And then, falling for the illusionary comforts of some belief, and clinging to it with an aggressive and intolerant fanaticism that may know no bounds, can be seen as not much more than an immature extreme reaction to one's weakness in living one's life with the permanent challenges, and even dangers, which no human civilization can ever eliminate completely. And among such challenges, or even dangers, are all those question marks which may affect us regarding the fundamentals of human existence ...

Third, in view of the above four questions, falling for a belief is in a way the same with giving a name to it, and then, under the fixity of that name, taking up an ever after mostly static attitude and position with respect to what one decides and accepts not to be able to know about for the rest of one's life. In sharp contradistinction to that, the above four questions keep widely and actively open the doors upon what is not known. Thus instead of the game of naming, and the subsequent game of enrolling oneself for evermore into yet another "ism", one is ready to be more alive, and considerably more so ...

Indeed, one approaches what is not know, what is not in one's awareness, what may never be known to one, what may never enter one's awareness, and one does so without drawing any permanently fixed boundary between the known and the unknown. And one is even careful not to draw such boundaries without realizing it, by mere default. Instead, one is letting oneself open to a potential, if not even actual, flow of all possible such boundaries, and in addition, tries to get actively involved in a two way exchange across such evermore moving boundaries ...

Comfort ?

Well, let us try to grow up, and realize that, no matter how happy, protected and privileged a childhood we may have enjoyed, the time comes when, even if we do hold for evermore to the eternal child in us, we are by now also the parents of that child ...

And as parents, we may more than on occasion have to face the music ...

The music, and not merely some belief ...

The End of Time ...

The issue of time, and specifically, the ways of our usual perception of time, is in the view of many a person in the know throughout the ages one of the critical, if not in fact, by far the most critical obstacle which may block us on our way to enlightenment. It is indeed highly questionable that a contraption so simple as a few dollars worth of a mechanical watch could in fact capture the essence of time. Certainly, no similarly simple device is believed to come anywhere near to reflecting the full nature of space. And the most powerful microscopes, or at the opposite scale, telescopes, are certainly considerably more complex than a simple mechanical watch.

And what is time like according to such a simple minded toy as a usual watch?

Well, as we all believe - and do so so very deeply in our awareness that we are not even aware of ever having consciously accepted that assumption - time is simply a past never to return, followed by a fleeting present, and further assumed to be followed by what is called future, and which is still nowhere, not even in one's memory ...

By the way, we may perhaps stop for a moment and ask : where indeed is the future, if it is not even in one's memory ?

But then, similarly, we as well ask : where did the past disappear, if the only place it may be is in someone's memory ?

And if present events are not at all recorded in anybody's memory, or in some other way, where do they disappear ?

Good that we do not so often wonder about such questions ...

If we did, we may get really in a trouble ... And few among us may find any interest, let alone value, worth such trouble ...

Now, strangely enough, time - much unlike space - seems to be relentlessly moving all on its own. Not to mention that no one, and nothing, seems to be able to stop it, let alone, to reverse it even a bit ...

Well, whatever the sages may have told us about the real time, the time which is not, and cannot at all be captured completely by our watches, the time which is claimed to be so different from that of our usual perceptions, we can by now for no less than one hundred and five years know - and not merely believe, imagine or assume - that, indeed, time, real time is so immensely more different, and in fact, so incredibly more complex and rich. In this regard, it was in 1905 when the young, 26 year old Einstein published his celebrated paper on Special Relativity. And in it, it is proven - based, surprisingly, only on simple, high school Mathematics - that there is not, and actually, there cannot be one unique, absolute and universally valid time.

And to shock all of us out of our many millennia long indulgence in our usual perception of time, it is shown that such a most basic and frequently used concept of considerable practical everyday importance like the simultaneity of two events is in fact not at all absolute, and instead, it essentially depends on the observer's position in space, the observer which records the two events. In other words, for some observer, two given events, say A and B, can be simultaneous, while for some other observer A may happen before B, and for yet another observer B may happen before A. Of course, this relativity depending on observers in the order in which the two events A and B occur is limited to a certain extent. In particular, it does not overrule causality. Certainly, it does not allow one, for instance, to kill one's own maternal grandmother just when she is born ...

However, it most certainly is an absolutely major wake up call regarding the dramatic inadequacy of our usual perception of time. And needless to say, the respective fact, brought to us by Special Relativity, of the far more complex structure of time has been perfectly confirmed in an immense number of physical experiments, and nowadays it is essentially used in certain everyday applications, such a the GPS devices we employ in our cars, among others.

The significant delay with which such and other major and critically important insights brought to us by modern science enter the public awareness are but further instances of the unfortunate inertia of civilizations. Inertia which make certain changes in fundamental concepts not to be done fast enough in the awareness of society, no matter how many proofs, and among them widely occurring empirical ones, may be there to support them ...

And yet, once one starts seeing time as a far more complex reality, it simply happens that any number of most important human issues may either fade away, or acquire completely new meanings, no matter how critically important, fundamental, or settled they seemed to be earlier ...

As it happens, however, C-S does not seem to be sufficiently concerned with such modern insights into more fundamental aspects of reality, among which time is certainly one ...

And which are the major issues which may simply fade away once we may develop a better perception of time ?

And which are the surprisingly new meanings many major issues may then obtain ?

It is, needless to say, up to the individual to ponder upon such questions ...

And the chance one has in pondering about such questions is that human civilization did by no means start with us - although as not seldom in the past, it may happen to end with the present generation. Indeed, it is our common and extraordinarily valuable human inheritance the fact that continually recorded human civilization can look back to half a dozen, or more, millennia, and over several continents. And among the outstanding accomplishments achieved some of the relevant are what may be called wisdom literature. And as it happens, not all such literature ended up appropriated by one or another religion. The teachings of Socrates and Plato, for instance, did fortunately for us escape such a fate ...

And such teachings can, needless to say, help a lot ...

Shall we, for instance, mention in this regard the Allegory of the Cave in Plato's book The Republic ?

As for the role of modern science, and specifically, of Physics, in opening up to our awareness undreamt of realms of immense relevance, let us note that the above example with Special Relativity teaching us about the considerably more complex reality of time is far from being the only one, or the most impressive as such. Indeed, General Relativity has opened up further realms for our awareness about space, time, mass, energy, motion, and so on, new realms which are so counter-intuitive from the traditional point of view as to be hard to imagine, were it not for the countless physical experiments which clearly confirm them, as well as for their practical applications in a growing number of instances of our everyday lives.

Added to that comes, of course, the effect of Quantum Theory which brings with it what appear to be yet more incredible openings of new realms available to our awareness. And one of the truly strange and rather incredible examples is the well known Many-Worlds Interpretation of Hugh Everett, formulated in 1957. The mere simultaneous possibility of many worlds, worlds which exists and develop independently of one another, is so radically new and different from customary views that its possible consequences have not yet been explored to any significant extent even in Physics, let alone in other human endeavours ...

As it happens, however, the Many-Worlds Interpretation is perfectly sound theoretically, and no one could bring up any well-founded arguments against it, except for its utter and absolutely unprecedented strangeness. Furthermore, that interpretation came about by attempts of Everett to overcome one of the most contested and critically important issues in the standard interpretation of Quantum Theory, called the Copenhagen Interpretation, namely the Problem of Measurement. And the fact is that with his Many-Worlds Interpretation, Everett did actually overcome in the most simple and direct way the Measurement Problem, namely, by eliminating it, by simply making a non-issue out of it ...

Amusingly, the Catholic Church did not at all take kindly to the emergence of modern science some centuries ago. And the story of Giordano Bruno is but one of the instances of the way emerging science, and the scientists pursuing it, got treated merely a couple of centuries earlier. While still alive, Copernicus, for instance, did not dare to publish his book on how the Earth was moving around the Sun, and

not the other way round as had been believed earlier.

Similarly, Descartes was very cautious with respect to the publication of his ideas. And Galileo Galilei nearly paid with his life for not exercising such caution ...

As can be guessed quite easily, the mentioned negative attitude of the Catholic Church was caused by their considerable fear that, once human awareness is open to certain new relevant realms, it would become simply impossible to maintain certain basic doctrines of religion, doctrines which had over some centuries become in fact crucial dogmas ...

And in this regard, the Catholic Church proved to be right ...

Similarly amusingly, in our own times, another kind of deep rift, albeit not less pernicious and dangerous, has opened up between hard science, that is, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Molecular Biology, Genetics, and a few other similarly precise and rigorous disciplines, and on the other hand, all the other intellectual ventures. Already back in 1959, the British scientist and novelist C P Snow had warned about the emergence of the so called two cultures, namely, that of hard science, and on the other hand, the rest.

One effect is that by far most of those who may ever be involved in the amelioration of the blight of spiritual poverty happen to come form one side of that widening divide, and that is not the side of hard science. No wonder then that, all too often, hard science is seen as rather coarse and Earth bound in order to have any kind of a more significant relevance in issues spiritual ...

After all, so many of us turn away for evermore from hard science, and we do so early in our school years. And ever after, we remain with a deficient, if not in fact, defective view of it, not to mention of those persons who choose to pursue it ...

Also, one may assume that a certain amount of what is called sour grapes attitude attaches to the general public view of hard science and of the scientists involved in it. It may indeed not be so easy to consider the world of hard science as being merely a strange and somewhat inconsequential venture pursued by equally strange and rather inconsequential persons, when those many impressive benefits of modern technology are supposed to depend on them, and in fact, be simply unattainable by any other means known so far ...

Well, one of the essential features of hard science is precisely that it is hard : it is about most clearly tangible realms, realms easily accessible to direct experience, to scientifically run experiments. That is, experiments which are about objective facts, experiments that can be repeated any number of times by anybody, if done under certain well defined conditions. Experiments which lead to clearly predictable and distinguishable end results easy to verify by one or the other of our five senses. And therefore, they are so clearly not about any kind of subjectivity whatsoever.

What could, thus, be more credible to a larger number of persons than such experiments ? Not to mention the growing number of their practical applications which we already enjoy in our everyday modern lives ?

And it is precisely the existence of that solid credibility, unmatched by any other form of human knowledge, that can help us accept in our awareness as a valid reality those incredible new realms which hard science keeps bringing to us ...

Indeed, it is this double feature of hard science, namely :

• to be precise, rigorous and confirmed by any number of scientific experiments, as well as everyday

applications,

• to be so seminal in its ever ongoing research which keeps producing an ongoing flow of revelations of new and new relevant realms for our awareness, relevant both for the further development of science and for applications, both of which are a never before known phenomenon in human history that can inject a new life and a new spirit into the venture of attenuating spiritual poverty ...

Is it, therefore, not the time in the venture of ameliorating spiritual poverty to advance from traditional theological, philosophical, metaphysical, poetic, and other similar rather soft ways of arguments, to arguments which fully benefit from the incredible openings to our awareness of new realms brought about by hard science ?

Twice Unknown ...

There are several unique features of the venture of modern hard science, and specifically of hard science research. And these features regard both the results of such research and the process research follows in order to obtain them. Namely, the persons involved in more fundamental research are facing the unknown to a far greater extent than in any other rational human venture. Furthermore, the process of research is also done mostly on not yet well enough known terms, namely, the terms specific to the unknown which is supposed to become known by the respective research.

A crucially important effect is the essential requirement that a researcher should be able to follow truth wherever it may lead. In particular, the researcher should be able not to inject in the research process personal emotions, interests or biases, except of course for a commitment to succeed, and a readiness to fail. And often, researchers do fail, either due to insufficient knowledge, insight, and in general, ability, or simply because the subject happens to be far too difficult at the given stage of development of science.

Needless to say, not all research in hard science conforms to the above, nor it is required to do so. And certainly, this is often the case with less fundamental research.

However, the fact is that, at its best, hard science research is twice facing the unknown, this being an essential and typical feature of it among all rational human ventures.

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