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0521604974 - The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy, and Human Value

John Cottingham

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CHAPTER I

*Religion and spirituality: from praxis to belief**Glaube Du! Es schadet nicht.* ('Believe! It won't hurt you.')Ludwig Wittgenstein.¹*Amor ipse notitia est.* ('Love is itself knowledge.')Gregory the Great.²

I FROM ANALYSIS TO EXERCISE

Bernard Williams, perhaps the most distinguished analytic moral philosopher writing at the turn of the twentieth century, once speculated that there might be something about ethical understanding that makes it inherently unsuited to be explored through the methods and techniques of analytic philosophy alone.³ If that is true, the point may apply *a fortiori* to religion, in so far as religious attitudes, even more than moral ones, often seem to encompass elements that are resistant to logical analysis. Analytic philosophers spend a great deal of their time dealing with propositions and with valid inference from one proposition to another. But as Leszek Kolakowski has reminded us in a recent book

Religion is not a set of propositions, it is the realm of worship wherein understanding, knowledge, the feeling of participation in the ultimate reality and moral commitment [all] appear as a single act, whose subsequent segregation

1 MS 128 [c. 1944], in *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains* [*Vermischte Bemerkungen: Eine Auswahl aus dem Nachlaß*, 1994], ed. G. H. von Wright, transl. P. Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, rev. edn., 1998), p. 52.

2 Gregory the Great, *Homelia in Evangelium* 27.4 (*Patrologia Latina*, ed. J. Migne, 76, 1207); cited in Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 222.

3 In an interview on the philosophy of Nietzsche broadcast on the BBC World Service in 1993. The term 'analytic philosophy' is in some respects an unsatisfactory one, since there have been many changes in how the subject is practised since the days of 'conceptual analysis' (see Preface, above); the implied contrast with so-called 'continental' philosophy has also become increasingly problematic. Nevertheless, I shall use the term in this chapter as a convenient shorthand for a certain recognisable way of doing philosophy that remains prevalent in many parts of the anglophone philosophical world.

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into separate classes of metaphysical, moral and other assertions might be useful but is bound to distort the sense of the original act of worship.⁴

This ‘distortion’ as Kolakowski terms it, is particularly apparent in academic philosophical discussions of religious issues. I have witnessed many intricate debates between theistic and atheistic protagonists in the philosophy of religion, but fascinating though these often are, I have seldom seen any of the participants give one inch of ground, as a result of the arguments advanced, let alone be moved by the arguments to modify or abandon their previous religious, or anti-religious, stance. One has a strange feeling that the intellectual analysis, however acute, does not capture what is at stake when someone gives, or refuses, their allegiance to a religious worldview. The focus is somehow wrong.

At first sight this might seem very odd. Isn’t the fundamental test that separates theists from atheists how they would answer the question ‘Do you or do you not accept the proposition that God exists?’ So must not the primary focus always be on this proposition – its precise content and implications, the evidence for its truth, and so on? Well, perhaps not. The propositions are, of course, important (and by the end of this book I hope it will be clear that I am *not* defending the ‘non-cognitivist’ line that sees beliefs and truth-claims as irrelevant to religious allegiance). But if we want to understand the religious outlook (or its rejection), and if we want to engage in fruitful dialogue about this most crucial aspect of how we view the world, then always putting the primary and initial focus on the propositions may nonetheless be misguided. Jung’s attitude seems to me to have been nearer the mark. He is widely and in my view rightly regarded as a strongly religious thinker, preoccupied with religious ideas and their central importance for a flourishing human life; yet he steadfastly refused to be drawn on the ‘*Do you or do you not . . . ?*’ question. ‘When people say they believe in the existence of God,’ he observed, ‘it has never impressed me in the least.’⁵ (I shall come back to Jung’s own particular take on these matters in Chapter 4.)

The approach to be taken in this book is in no sense intended to be disparaging of the analytic tradition (a tradition in which I was myself raised): goals such as those of conceptual clarity and precise argumentation seem to me important elements of any fruitful philosophising.

4 Leszek Kolakowski, *Religion* (South Bend: St Augustine’s Press, 2001), p. 165.

5 From a letter to H. L. Philp of 1956, in C. G. Jung, *Collected Works*, ed. H. Read et al. (London: Routledge, 1953–79), vol. XVIII, pp. 706–7. Quoted in M. Palmer, *Freud and Jung on Religion* (London: Routledge, 1977), p. 125.

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Nevertheless, the *way* many contemporary academic philosophers go about their task – maintaining an astringently dry style modelled on legalistic or scientific prose, scrupulously avoiding literary or other potentially emotive allusions, trying not so much to persuade as to corner their opponent by doggedly closing off any possible escape routes – these techniques, even in the hands of the virtuoso practitioner, often seem somehow to miss the mark, or at least to need supplementing, when we are dealing with the phenomenon of religious allegiance and its significance.

To see why our philosophical discourse about religion may be in need of a certain supplementation or broadening if it is to engage us on more than a narrowly intellectual plane, it may help if we shift the emphasis slightly, moving from the domain of religion to the closely related, but distinct, domain of spirituality. The concept of spirituality is an interesting one, in so far as it does not seem to provoke, straight off, the kind of immediately polarised reaction one finds in the case of religion. This may be partly to do with the vagueness of the term – in popular contemporary usage the label ‘spiritual’ tends to be invoked by those purveying a heterogeneous range of products and services, from magic crystals, scented candles and astrology, to alternative medicine, tai chi, and meditation courses. Yet at the richer end of the spectrum, we find the term used in connection with activities and attitudes which command widespread appeal, irrespective of metaphysical commitment or doctrinal allegiance. Even the most convinced atheist may be prepared to avow an interest in the ‘spiritual’ dimension of human existence, if that dimension is taken to cover forms of life that put a premium on certain kinds of intensely focused moral and aesthetic response, or on the search for deeper reflective awareness of the meaning of our lives and of our relationship to others and to the natural world. In general, the label ‘spiritual’ seems to be used to refer to activities which aim to fill the creative and meditative space left over when science and technology have satisfied our material needs. So construed, both supporters and opponents of religion might agree that the loss of the spiritual dimension would leave our human existence radically impoverished.

There is, I think, a further reason for the widespread agreement on the value of the spiritual domain in this sense, despite the polarisation of outlooks when it comes to acceptance or rejection of religious or supernaturalist claims. Spirituality has long been understood to be a concept that is concerned in the first instance with activities rather than theories, with ways of living rather than doctrines subscribed to, with praxis rather than belief.

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In the history of philosophy, the epithet ‘spiritual’ is most commonly coupled not with the term ‘beliefs’ but with the term ‘exercises’. Perhaps the most famous exemplar is the sixteenth-century *Ejercicios espirituales* (‘Spiritual Exercises’, c. 1522–41) of St Ignatius Loyola. As its name implies, this is not a doctrinal treatise, nor even a book of sermons, but a structured set of exercises or practices; it is a practical course of activities for the retreatant, to be followed in a prescribed order, carefully divided into days and weeks. The nearest purely philosophical parallel is Descartes’ *Meditations*, written over a hundred years later. But although the *Meditations* were perhaps intended by Descartes to be read one-a-day for six days (he had of course been educated by the Jesuits so would have been familiar with the Ignatian way of doing things), this feature of the Cartesian work is in one sense no more than a stylistic conceit: the validity (or otherwise) of the arguments, their persuasiveness and compelling force, float entirely free of any question about the time taken to read them, whether that be a whole term of study or a single day. In Ignatius, by contrast, we are dealing with a practical manual – a training manual – and the structured timings, the organized programmes of readings, contemplation, meditation, prayer, and reflection, interspersed with the daily rhythms of eating and sleeping, are absolutely central, indeed they are the essence of the thing. Ignatius himself opens the work by making an explicit parallel with physical training programmes: ‘just as strolling, walking and running are exercises for the body, so “spiritual exercises” is the name given to every way of preparing and disposing one’s soul to rid itself of disordered attachments.’⁶

Moving the focus back to a much earlier epoch than the Renaissance, Pierre Hadot, in his remarkable recent study of spiritual exercises in the ancient world, has repeatedly underlined what we might call the practical dimension of the spiritual.⁷ There were many Stoic treatises entitled ‘On Exercises’, and the central notion of *askesis*, found for example in Epictetus, implied not so much ‘asceticism’ in the modern sense as a practical programme of training, concerned with the ‘art of living’.⁸ Fundamental to such programmes was learning the technique of *prosoche* – attention, a continuous vigilance and *presence* of the mind (a notion,

6 Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556), *Spiritual Exercises* [*Ejercicios espirituales*, c. 1525], Annotation I; transl. J. Munitz and P. Endean (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), p. 283.

7 Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995), ch. 3. Originally published as *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1987).

8 Epictetus, *Discourses* [*Diatribae*, c. 100 CE], III, 12, 1–7; I, 4, 14ff; I, 15, 2. Cited in Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p. 110.

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incidentally, that calls to mind certain Buddhist spiritual techniques).⁹ Crucial also was the mastery of methods for the ordering of the passions – what has been called the therapy of desire.¹⁰ The general aim of such programmes was not merely intellectual enlightenment, or the imparting of abstract theory, but a transformation of the whole person, including our patterns of emotional response. *Metanoia*, a fundamental conversion or change of heart, is the Greek term; in the Roman Stoic Seneca it appears as a ‘shift in one’s mentality’ (*translatio animi*) or a ‘changing’ (*mutatio*) of the self. ‘I feel, my dear Lucilius’, says Seneca, ‘that I am being not only reformed but transformed (*non tantum emendari sed transfigurari*).’¹¹

This envisaged process of internal transformation, in contrast to the intellectual business of evaluating propositions, seems to me fundamental to understanding not just the nature of spirituality, but also that of religion in general. What holds good for any plausible account of the tradition of spiritual exercises also holds good more generally for any true understanding of the place of religion in human life: we have to acknowledge what might be called the *primacy of praxis*, the vital importance that is placed on the individual’s embarking on a path of practical self-transformation, rather than (say) simply engaging in intellectual debate or philosophical analysis. This explains, I think, that strange sense of distortion, of wrong focus, which one has when confronted with many of the classic debates on philosophy of religion in the academic literature – the sense that despite the grandeur and apparent centrality of the issues raised, they do not capture what is at the heart of the religious enterprise.

Yet in case you should think I am suggesting that the philosopher should therefore leave the stage when religion is the subject of discussion, I should hasten to add what may seem a paradox: that this thesis, the thesis of the primacy of praxis in religion, is one that is itself perfectly susceptible of being examined and supported by philosophical argument. And that is what I shall attempt for the remainder of this opening chapter.

2 WHY PRAXIS MUST COME FIRST

To begin with, we should observe that the notion of the primacy, or priority, of praxis is ambiguous. The claim might be simply one of causal or temporal priority – that practical involvement in organized religious

⁹ *Discourses*, IV, 12, 1–21; cf. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p. 84.

¹⁰ Cf. M. Nussbaum (ed.), *The Poetics of Therapy*, *Apeiron* 23:4 (December 1990).

¹¹ Seneca, *Epistulae morales* [64 CE], VI, 1.

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observance generally, in the lives of most individuals, comes at an earlier stage than the theoretical evaluation of doctrines. That seems uncontroversial enough: to quote Kolakowski again, ‘people are [typically] initiated into the understanding of a religious language and into worship through participation in the life of a religious community, rather than through rational persuasion.’¹² But I want to suggest something rather stronger than this, namely that it is in the very nature of religious understanding that it characteristically stems from practical involvement rather than from intellectual analysis.

The philosopher Blaise Pascal was a striking advocate of this line of thought. His famous *nuit de feu* or ‘night of fire’ on 23 November 1654 – the intense religious experience that led to a radical change in his life – generated in him what he describes as feelings of ‘heartfelt certainty, peace and joy’. But the God who is the source of these feelings is ‘the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’, not the God of ‘philosophers and scholars’.¹³ Commentators have discussed the exact import of these words, but the general point is clear enough: faith, for Pascal, must arise in the context of a living tradition of practical religious observance, rather than from debate and analysis in the seminar room. This is consistent with Pascal’s general philosophical stance on the epistemic status of religious claims, which may be described as proto-Kantian: questions about the nature and existence of God are beyond the reach of discursive reason. ‘If there is a God,’ says Pascal, ‘he is infinitely beyond our comprehension . . . and hence we are incapable of knowing either what he is or whether he is’.¹⁴ And since reason cannot settle the matter, we have to make a practical choice, a choice on which our ultimate happiness depends.

Mention of Pascal always conjures up the spectre of his famous (or infamous) ‘wager’: If God exists, the religious believer can look forward to ‘an infinity of happy life’; if there is no God, then nothing has been sacrificed by becoming a believer (‘what have you got to lose?’ asks Pascal). The upshot is that ‘wagering’ on the existence of God is a ‘sure thing’ – a safe bet. Stated thus baldly, the idea of the wager is unlikely to arouse much enthusiasm from either theists or atheists; Voltaire (who was perhaps a bit of both) condemned the introduction of a game of loss and gain as ‘indecent and puerile, ill fitting the gravity of the subject’.¹⁵ The

¹² Kolakowski, *Religion*, p. 172.

¹³ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* [1670], ed. L. Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1962), no. 913.

¹⁴ *Pensées*, ed. Lafuma, no. 418.

¹⁵ *Lettres philosophiques* [1733]. Quoted in Ward Jones, ‘Religious Conversion, Self-Deception and Pascal’s Wager’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 36:2 (April 1998), p. 172.

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idea of eternal life as an inducement for the believer appears to involve a 'carrot and stick' approach, which fails to respect the autonomy of the human subject – and so it may confirm the suspicions of the critics of religion that allegiance to a superior divine power comes at the cost of radical heteronomy, a loss of our human dignity and independence (I shall be tackling this issue in Chapter 3). But the supporters of religion may be also dissatisfied with the wager, in so far as it seems to misunderstand the nature of salvation: on any plausible understanding of the goodness of God, He cannot be supposed to bribe or threaten human beings with happiness or damnation. Standard Christian doctrine makes it clear, instead, that salvation is offered as the 'free gift of God' (in St Paul's phrase);¹⁶ and that in any case, properly understood, it involves no mere affirmation or placing of a bet, but a radical moral transformation – or, in the image of St John's gospel, a new birth.¹⁷

Yet Pascal's position is in fact much more subtle than may at first appear. In the first place, though his wager discussion is often called 'the pragmatic argument', he is emphatically not offering an argument for the existence of God (as already noted, he regards the question of the divine existence as outside the realm of rationally accessible knowledge). In the second place, and very importantly, he is not offering an argument designed to produce *immediate* assent or faith in the claims of religion; in this sense, the image of placing a bet, an instantaneous act of putting down the chips, is misleading. Rather, he envisages faith as the *destination* – one to be reached by means of a long road of religious praxis; considerations about happiness are simply introduced as a motive for embarking on that journey.¹⁸ And thirdly and finally, the rewards invoked are not simply those of the next world (though that is, of course, how the wager is initially presented), but instead emerge by the end of his discussion as signal benefits related to this present life.

It is here that the thought of Pascal links up with the ancient tradition of spiritual praxis referred to earlier. The 'therapies for the soul' described in the old systems of Hellenistic philosophy offered to their adherents (to quote again from Pierre Hadot) an instruction not in 'abstract theory', but in the 'art of living'. What was envisaged is

¹⁶ Romans 6:23.

¹⁷ John 3:3 (Jesus to Nicodemus).

¹⁸ 'Your desired destination is faith but you do not yet know the road.' *Pensées*, no. 418. See further, Ward Jones, 'Religious Conversion'.

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not merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being . . . a progress which causes us to *be* more fully, and makes us better . . . a conversion which raises the individual from an inauthentic condition of life, darkened by unconsciousness and harassed by worry, to . . . inner peace and freedom . . . One was to renounce the false values of wealth, honors, and pleasure, and turn towards the true values of virtue, contemplation, a simple life-style, and the simple happiness of existing.¹⁹

Similarly, the benefits that Pascal stresses at the culmination of his argument involve precisely such progress in virtue and growth towards contentment. 'What harm will come to you if you make this choice?', he asks. You will renounce the 'tainted pleasures' of 'glory' and 'luxury', but instead 'you will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, a doer of good works, a good friend, sincere and true.'²⁰ The carrot here is not so much carrot pie in the sky as the goal of beneficial internal transformation which is the aim of any sound system of spiritual praxis; you have much to gain, says Pascal, and little to lose.

3 THE HEART HAS ITS REASONS

Locating Pascal's advocacy of religious commitment within the ancient tradition of systems of spiritual exercises may go some way towards illuminating the idea of the primacy of praxis, but it still leaves many questions unanswered. There seems no doubt that Pascal, as a devout Christian believer, strongly maintained the *truth* of those claims which his own spiritual journey had led him to accept. Yet if truth-claims are involved, it may be objected, then the emphasis on praxis is highly suspect. For religious praxis, on Pascal's own account, involves a progressive transformation of our emotional attitudes: he explicitly advocates measures for the softening or taming (*abêtir*) of the responses of the aspiring believer.²¹ In a typical spiritual exercise, stubborn resistance will

19 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p. 83 and p.104 (cross-referring to Epictetus, *Discourses*, I, 15, 2.)

20 *Pensées*, no. 418.

21 'You want to cure yourself of unbelief, and you ask for remedies: learn from those who were hampered like you and who now waver all they possess. These are people who know the road you would like to follow; they are cured of the malady for which you seek a cure; so follow them and begin as they did – *by acting as if they believed*, by taking holy water, having masses said, and so on. In the natural course of events this in itself will make you believe, this will train you.' Pascal, *Pensées*, no. 418, translated in J. Cottingham (ed.), *Western Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pt. V, §6. The connotations of the term *abêtir*, etymologically connected with the training or taming of an animal or beast (*bête*) may initially seem to be particularly disturbing. But see further J. Cottingham *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 92ff.

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gradually, or perhaps suddenly and spectacularly, be overcome by a capitulation of will, a flood of remorse, an overwhelming sense of submission, a rush of exaltation, or any of the many heightened emotional states described in the prolific annals of conversion experiences. Pascal himself speaks in the record of his night of fire, on a parchment found sewn into his clothing on his death, of his 'joy, joy, joy, tears of joy'. The poet Rilke in his *Duino Elegies* offers a more extended expression of the same emotional dynamic in an ecstatic prayer that his passionate weeping may sound forth a note of radiant affirmation:

*Daß von den klargeschlagenen Hämmern des Herzens
keiner versage an weichen, zweifelnden oder
reißenden Saiten.*

That not one key of the clear struck chords of my heart
may send out a faint or doubtful note from its strings.²²

All scepticism or lingering restraint is to be cast aside.

But now (to come to the objection) how can such heightened emotional states be compatible with the judicious evaluation of truth claims? If spiritual praxis precedes intellectual assessment, is there not a serious danger that the former will by its very nature obstruct the latter? At best, it seems possible that it may be a distraction from the process of understanding and evaluating the truth-claims in question; at worst, that it may risk becoming a kind of brainwashing, a softening up process, which leads the devotee to abandon critical rationality in favour of an adoring acquiescence, irrespective of evidence. Like Winston Smith, in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, our course of praxis may end up making us see five fingers when only four are displayed:

He gazed up at the enormous face. Forty years it had taken him to learn what kind of smile was hidden beneath the dark moustache. O cruel, needless misunderstanding! O stubborn, self-willed exile from the loving breast! Two gin-scented tears trickled down the sides of his nose . . . [T]he struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother.²³

The worry here is a disturbing one, and it must I think apply to any approach that seems to retreat from a strictly cognitivist account of religious truth, or which appears (as here) to suggest that the route to that truth is anything other than detached rational evaluation. Yet I think

22 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duineser Elegien* [1922], X (transl. J. C.). There is a German text with English translation in J. B. Leishman and S. Spender (eds.), *Rainer Maria Rilke: Duino Elegies* (London: Hogarth Press, 1939; 4th edn. 1968).

23 George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1949), final paragraph.

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the materials for answering the worry, at least in part, may be drawn from an illuminating exploration, provided by Martha Nussbaum, in a very different context, of the vital role played by the emotions in human understanding; in effect, this amounts to a radical critique of the traditional rigid dichotomy between the supposedly antithetical faculties of reason and the passions. In her justly admired paper 'Love's Knowledge', Nussbaum deploys an example from Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. The hero has just carefully and judiciously examined his feelings in the most meticulous way, and come to the reasoned conclusion that he no longer cares for Albertine. But then the housekeeper Françoise brings him the news that Albertine has left town – just at the moment he has convinced himself completely and with utter assurance that he no longer loves her. An immediate, acute, and overwhelming sense of anguish tells him – he was wrong. The authorial voice muses:

I had been mistaken in thinking that I could see clearly into my own heart. A *knowledge* which the shrewdest perceptions of the mind would not have given me, had now been brought to me, hard, glittering, strange, like crystallised salt, by the abrupt reaction of pain.²⁴

Nussbaum uses this striking episode to cast general doubt on a view of knowledge which has powerful roots in our philosophical tradition. According to this view, knowledge (for example about oneself, whether one loves someone) 'can best be attained by a detached, unemotional, exact intellectual scrutiny of one's condition, conducted in the way a scientist would conduct a piece of research . . . sorting, analyzing, classifying.'²⁵ But the realization achieved by Marcel, the protagonist of the novel, gives a different result:

Marcel's account of self-knowledge is no simple rival to the intellectual account. It tells us that the intellectual account was *wrong*: wrong about the content of the truth about Marcel, wrong about the methods appropriate for gaining this knowledge, wrong as well about what sort of experience . . . knowing is. And it tells us that to try to grasp love intellectually is a way of not suffering, not loving . . . a stratagem of flight.²⁶

Pascal once famously observed: *le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point* – the heart has its reasons, which reason does not know at

24 M. Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu* [1913–27], transl. L. Scott Moncrieff (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967), vol. III, p. 426. Quoted in Nussbaum, 'Love's Knowledge' [1988], reprinted in M. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 265.

25 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 262.

26 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* pp. 268–9 (emphasis added).