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Religious Experience Characterized

Religion chases, and sometimes catches, life's meaning in the hallways of human experience. What, however, empowers religion and keeps its quest alive, despite its notorious failures and crimes throughout history? The answer lies, at least partly, in religious *experience* of a distinctive *power* that supplies life's *meaning* in a morally relevant way. So, the answer is not in mere beliefs, creeds, theories, or rituals. Religion without experience is thin on motivating evidence, whereas experience without religion is short on life's meaning.

The meaning in question is not reducible to human desires, intentions, or pursuits. Instead, it represents "the meaning *of* human life," in a morally relevant sense. It thus goes beyond anyone's "meaning *in* life" that stems just from one's desires or intentions. Mere desires or intentions for something will not yield the kind of meaning suited to religion. They do not include the powerful *experience of life's overarching meaning* found in religion. We shall see whether this approach to religion and meaning is tenable, given our relevant evidence.

1 THE MAZE OF HUMAN LIFE

Religion, religious experience, and life's meaning do not arise in a vacuum. Instead, they emerge, if they emerge at all, in a context of action-options for humans, indeed in a

seeming maze of such options. The maze experienced by humans presents ongoing options for decision-making: to act this way or that way, or (perhaps) not at all – where refraining from acting can be a matter of decision, too. The maze of options comes with one's dynamic, wavering experience of the world, in relation to how one is to respond to that experience. Either one can ignore an experience (say, a taste experience), or one can seek to prolong it, cooperatively. Taking a third option, one can seek an alternative to the experience, say, in another kind of experience. Such options continue for one experience after another, and a person often responds with subconscious decisions. So, one can be in a maze of decision-making without being aware that one is. Even so, a person's decisions are ongoing, prompted by the maze of options in experience. These decisions are not just about experience, given that one's life is not reducible to experience, but they often have a basis in experience.

We find ourselves in the maze, on reflection, although we did not choose to enter it. It comes to us uninvited, and it persists at least for a time, without our invitation. The maze seems, in addition, to be part of our lot as intentional agents, as no conscious intentional agent seems immune to it. In some people, it yields decision fatigue, a weariness about the parade of options for decision. The fatigue can overwhelm if one's decisions are felt to be dangerous or frustratingly uncertain. Such decisions can wear one down under stress, perhaps even to the point of decision paralysis. One then can form a habit of indecision as a protective measure, although this habit itself may be initiated by a decision. A question arises: Is there any way out of the stress of the maze, short of one's ceasing to be an agent at all? The answer will not come easy, if it comes at all. Even so, the question merits our attention, and it will get it in due course.

Many people in the maze will raise a natural question: What, if anything, is the purpose, point, or goal for us in the

maze of action-options? In particular, is there such a singular thing as "the purpose" in the maze generally, perhaps emerging from the overall purpose *of*, or *for*, the maze? Some people hold that there are only various *purposes* inside the maze, stemming from individual human goals in it. There is, in that view, no overall purpose, point, or goal of the maze, regardless of what people intend to do in the maze. So, any talk of what the maze overall is intended to accomplish would be misplaced, if that view holds. I might intend to accomplish various things with my decisions in the maze (such as survival and the common good), but my intention would not generalize to the maze overall, or to everyone in it, as an overarching value or norm. I, among others, lack the needed authority or normative value for such a broad role.

People disagree over whether the maze of action-options has overall value, that is, comprehensive, overarching value for the maze as a whole. Such value would be desirable for many people, because it would underwrite overall meaning for the maze and thus for human life in the maze. In that case, the value would be *sensemaking*, or meaning-making, for the maze, by giving sense or meaning to it overall. The overall sense, meaning, or point of the maze then could be to realize, or to actualize, the overarching value of human life. (Even so, we sometimes use "the value of life" and "the meaning of life" interchangeably.) While acknowledging controversy over the existence of overarching value for human life, we shall explore whether a case can be made for it.

Overarching meaning for the maze and human life would be personal if grounded in the valuable intentions of a personal, intentional agent, such as a God who is personal. In that case, the overall *personal* meaning *of* the maze would depend on an intentional agent who can give such overall meaning or purpose. This agent, having a special role in giving meaning, thus could be sensemaking for the maze overall and for the human lives in it.

Individual humans fall short of that general role, because their intentions do not bear normatively, in their value, on the maze overall, or on everyone in it.

We may think of "the actual meaning of human life" (or of the maze) as identifying what actually makes it *worthwhile* overall, that is, *worth our living* overall, despite its pain, frustration, and evil. So, if nothing makes our living our lives worthwhile overall, or on balance, then there is no "actual meaning of human life." In that case, one still might talk of "the meaning of human life" or of "life's meaning" *for certain people* in a less objective sense, relative to their (perhaps subjective) experiences and commitments. Such talk, however, would have no requirement of a sensemaker that actually makes living human life worthwhile overall.

The kind of sensemaker in question goes beyond various values in human life to an overall value that is meaning-making for living human life overall. Such an overall value and the corresponding meaning of human life, at least under certain hospitable circumstances, would be available to be discovered and received by humans. It would not be fully or even largely created by them in the way a *merely* perceived meaning of life would be. Meaning for life, or life's meaning, *endorsed by a person* thus can rest on merely perceived value that is not actual. In that case, we have something other than the actual meaning of human life. Someone might propose the meaning of an individual human life without extending this to human life generally. Even so, we would need to identify the relevant sensemaker and explain its restriction to an individual life. It will not do to claim simply that the individual endorses a particular sensemaker, because a merely perceived sensemaker could be at work. In any case, our interest is now in the prospect for an overarching meaning for human life in general, and not just for an individual life.

A God who is personal (i.e., a personal agent) could supply an overall value for human life and sustain human lives via the value of God's perfect moral character. Indeed,

God could supply *lasting* value and meaning for human lives in a way that short-lived humans, with their temporary purposes, could not. In addition, God could issue commands on the basis of a perfect moral character, and thereby create or at least clarify and motivate morally grounded duties for humans (thereby avoiding the arbitrariness threatened by Plato's Euthyphro problem). God would not face a regress problem of further mazes, because God's perfect moral character would suitably ground divine decisions and commands. It would be premature, however, to assume that only a personal God could provide overall value for human lives. Other options await our consideration. It also would be premature to assume that the human maze exists in isolation from mazes of action-options facing other species. For all we know, mazes for responsible decision-makers extend beyond the human maze, but we cannot digress.

People inside the maze can experience value and meaning for their lives. They also can be convicted to give the value and meaning an overarching role in guiding their lives, covering all aspects of their lives. Perhaps, however, this would be just *self*-conviction, merely an individual's decision to value certain things for his or her life. Some interpreters, in contrast, will propose a role for values that does not depend on such a human decision but entails value *realism*: the view that the values are independent of human decisions and attitudes. Whichever position one favors, any overarching meaning of the maze, bearing on the maze overall, would not arise without *something* transcending the maze that gives it such meaning and is thus sensemaking for it. For instance, an intentional agent who "guides" the maze with an overarching purpose for it could give it overarching meaning. In the absence of such a purpose, the maze could have only internal meaning, courtesy of the agents inside. We shall ask whether religious experience bears on the issue of the breadth of such meaning. Our question will be whether such experience underwrites

overarching meaning for human life beyond the purposes of individual humans.

A thought experiment can illuminate our perspective on the maze. Imagine a visitor who finds herself on planet Earth with no historical experience here. She does have, however, a typical level of human intelligence and a moral perspective acceptable to morally decent humans. What would our visitor think about the goodness and badness of the planet, and about its meaning and hope for the future? Suppose that, after due examination, she finds it to be a mixed bag regarding goodness and badness; it would be hard to fault her for that. Would she, however, find its future meaningful or hopeful for any kind of overall triumph of goodness over badness? Perhaps not, after due examination. Still, she would have other questions, similarly in need of careful examination. She would not assume, in any case, that human life has overall meaning only if it has an overall triumph of goodness over badness.

One pressing question would be: Is this planet subject to any overarching purpose, beyond that of its human citizens, individually or group-wise? Its citizens disagree on this matter, but our visitor still wants to know the fact of the matter. Where would she begin, after her consultation with the available citizens? Where, in particular, would she look for relevant evidence? Perhaps she would canvass a range of people about their various moral experiences, including her own. It is unclear, however, that she would agree with the following bold statement by H. H. Farmer: "Our minds are so made – and after all we must in the end accept our minds – that we cannot but believe that the Universe in which we find ourselves is somehow in its real nature a suitable stage for the fullest realisation of ourselves" (1929, p. 21). Perhaps our visitor would lack adequate evidence for such a striking claim, as, I suspect, many of us do. We seem not to be required to believe that our universe is a good stage for our "fullest realisation." Many people are crushed

by the evil of our universe in a way that blocks such realization for them, at least in their earthly lives.

Our thought experiment raises the question of how one can discern, if one can, whether our planet is under an overarching purpose, beyond the goals of its human citizens. Perhaps there is an overarching purpose, but we are unable to discern it. This seems to be a live option, but it also seems questionable. One might suppose that the source of the relevant purpose would enable us to discern that purpose, if only to contribute to its realization in human lives. Even so, we should not reduce a question about an overarching purpose for the planet to a question about such a purpose for human life; the former would be broader than the latter. (Chapters 7 and 8 return to the matter of discerning an overarching purpose for human life.) Our immediate effort, however, will be to identify some approaches to religious experience that may illuminate the topic of overarching meaning for human life.

2 CORE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND LIFE'S MEANING

We may think of a *core* religious experience as one *characteristic* of *religious* experiences. The latter experiences bear on a person's perceptual or sensory awareness, including experiential direct attention-attraction, in a way pertinent to religious matters. They involve the presence of something (understood broadly) to one's awareness, and thus cannot be reduced to an inference or a judgment. The relevant presence to awareness in direct attention-attraction is qualitative in experience in a way that mere inference or judgment is not. To the extent that we understand direct attention-attraction in awareness, we understand the relevant kind of experience. So, it would be misguided to suggest that a suitable notion of experience is not available to us (contrary to Aubrey 1933 and Lash 1990).

Lev (Leo) Tolstoy has described his life-changing religious experience in a way that qualifies it as a core religious

experience. Tolstoy was not only a theist but also a Christian. Even so, his core religious experience is understandable without his commitment to Christianity or even to theism. It centers on *overarching meaning* for human life and includes an indispensable ethical component, without being reducible to that component or to a philosophy. It is a core religious experience, because some of its aspects are characteristic of religious experiences in general.

Tolstoy describes his transformative religious experience in abridged form:

> All that was around me came to life and received a meaning.... And I was saved from suicide. When and how this transformation within me was accomplished, I could not say. Just as [earlier in my life] the life force within me was gradually and imperceptibly destroyed, and I encountered the impossibility of life, the halting of life, and the need to murder myself, so too did this life force return to me gradually and imperceptibly.... I returned to the conviction that the single most important purpose in my life was to be better, to live according to this. (1882, pp. 76–77; trans. first two sentences, Aylmer Maude, and remaining sentences, David Patterson)

Tolstoy had struggled with the option of suicide, but this struggle, like his Christian theism, is not crucial to his core religious experience. The core of his religious experience lies elsewhere.

Something *happened*, or *was presented*, to Tolstoy in his experience, including in his qualitative awareness; it attracted his attention directly, with qualitative content. So, it was not just a thought, a belief, or anything else simply intellectual. He directly *experienced* the emergence of *meaning*, and thus sensemaking, for his life. This meaning figured for him in all surrounding things as well as "within" him, particularly in the "transformation within" him. It thus was overarching meaning for his life. He reports: "All that was around me came to life and received

a meaning." This was something Tolstoy directly experienced in a powerful way. The relevant meaning was person-engaging in a practical manner that included and even prompted Tolstoy's forming an intention to become conformed to it, that is, to become "better." It thus was valuable for his practical life; it was not merely speculative or abstract in the way many ethical and philosophical reflections are.

Whatever else the meaning in question includes, it is practical and *self-involving* for Tolstoy by its becoming action-guiding and life-guiding for him. It figured centrally in his primary intention and goal to become better. As Tolstoy explains, in response to experiencing meaning for his life: "I returned to the conviction that the single most important purpose in my life was to be better, to live according to this." So, his core religious experience of meaning gave him the conviction that the primary purpose of his life is to become *better*. This purpose is, in his conviction, *morally* relevant, bearing on how he ought to be and to live. It concerns his life overall, and not just some part of it. In addition, the conviction went beyond reflection to Tolstoy's intention to direct his life in a particular way. We sometimes use "religious experience" when no experience of overarching meaning is indicated, but that falls short of a *core* religious experience in the sense proposed. I aim to separate peripheral matters from the core, in order to illuminate what motivates some prominent religious figures and their religions.

The role of *conviction* is important in a religious experience of meaning for a human life. It distinguishes an experience from a mere belief, creed, theory, or ritual. A religious experience of meaning for life includes one's being convicted by the experienced meaning for one's life: in particular, one's being convicted by its primary *value* for one's life, and one's being convicted to intend to form one's life in a corresponding way. Being thus convicted differs from a simple "conviction" (as a mere belief) *that*

something is true. It includes one's experience of the value, or at least the sensed value, of the overall meaning of one's life. Tolstoy's direct experience of the value of becoming better serves as a good example. Such an experience can motivate and guide one in forming beliefs and plans about one's life. When one forms an intention to conform to the value, the experience also can prompt actions in one's life, particularly actions suited to the overall meaning of one's life.

One's experience of overall meaning for life can mislead regarding what is the *actual* meaning of human life overall. This can result from an experience that misleads one regarding the actual value of human life overall and relates one at best to *merely sensed* value. For instance, I might sense that the acquiring of personal power is the value and meaning of human life overall. The relevant notion of "sensed" does not rely on a familiar notion of "sensory"; it is more akin to a notion of "sensing a duty" or "sensing a need." A *merely* sensed value of human life overall (as we shall use the language) includes one's sensing *something* that fails to be the actual overarching value of human life. Even if it is not that actual value, one can sense it to be such and thereby take it to be such, fallibly and thus perhaps erroneously.

Interpretation of *something experienced* figures in one's sensing something to be life's value and meaning. So, we will distinguish between religious experiences that mislead regarding reality, such as the reality of life's value, and those that do not. The same distinction applies to the corresponding sensed values and meanings bearing on human life. A *veridical* core religious experience would include an experience of the actual overarching meaning of life, but a nonveridical religious experience would not. The means for distinguishing the two in an actual case is a separate, epistemological matter (to which Chapters 7 and 8 return).

Being convicted by life's meaning has the following variations: (a) being convicted of *the primary value* underlying