ON RELIGION, TRUTH, MORALITY AND MEANING

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We all know that life conditions are different for different people. Not all of these differences are fair. Sometimes religions criticise the unfair differences, sometimes religions are the cause of them. It is obvious that there are people who cannot help being religious and to whom religion is a prerequisite for everything; it is equally obvious that there are people who cannot help *not* being religious and to whom religion as such scarcely adds anything to their lives. When people from different groups justify their beliefs, they do so mostly with the help of arguments that convince only themselves and like-minded individuals. This is not a problem as long as the beliefs they justify remain purely theoretical. However, religious or ideological beliefs are also about one's way of life and can have practical implications that are not acceptable to people with other views of life. Problems caused by such collisions cannot be solved by referring to one's own religious or secular beliefs. A way of reasoning has to be found which does not presuppose the acceptance of those particular beliefs. In order to achieve this aim, I will develop a philosophical view of religion according to which religion is neither true nor false en bloc. I will do this by questioning certain religious claims according to which there is no truth, morality or meaning without religion.

According to some religious people, there is an ultimate reality. Whether it is called God, the Divine or Transcendence, it is conceived as the ultimate Truth. This combined ultimate Truth and Reality is claimed to be the prerequisite and the guarantee of our human truths in at least two senses. First, the very possibility for us

humans to have truths is dependent on the existence of ultimate Truth and Reality: without these, there would be no humans and nothing to have truths about. Second, since ultimate Truth is ultimate Reality and, as such, cannot be otherwise, truth is that which is in accordance with what cannot be otherwise.

This seems to be the background to the metaphysical realist conception of truth as a correspondence relation with reality as it is, irrespective of how we conceptualise it, and as something which makes our statements true or false. However, this conception of truth, whether in religious or naturalist versions, is problematic.

Roughly speaking, I use the term metaphysical realist to refer to a person who claims, first, that things in reality have properties and relate to other things in reality independently of language and concepts and, second, that these language and concept-independent properties and relations determine what statements of reality are true. Nobody is likely to deny the claim that a statement is true if and only if it is the case as maintained in the statement. The philosophically crucial question, however, is what conclusions can reasonably be drawn from this minimal idea of truth as correspondence.

My first objection to metaphysical realism is that it leads to scepticism. If reality as such, irrespective of how we conceptualise it, determines what statements are true, then we can never actually be sure whether our beliefs are correct, since we are dependent on concepts in our attempts to know something about reality and say something true of it. Thus, if metaphysical realism leads to scepticism and scepticism, in the sense of never being sure whether our statements correspond with reality, is not an option in our lived lives, then there is something problematic inherent in metaphysical realism. This objection is closely related to the second one. Because we cannot even conceive of what reality irrespective of how we conceptualise it would be like, the metaphysical realist's conception of truth as a correspondence relation with reality as it is, independent of human conceptualisation, either tells us nothing at all or amounts to the incoherent claim that we can understand reality before conceptually grasping it. So, let me instead develop a pragmatically realist conception of truth.

For the sake of clarity, I want to emphasise, first, that I make a distinction between conceptions of truth and the concept of truth. The latter, i.e. the formal Aristotelian definition of truth, that a statement is true if and only if it is the case as claimed in the statement, functions as a formal claim that has to be met by every

conception of truth. For instance, a conception of truth such as what your peers let you get away with does not meet this formal claim since what your peers let you get away with may be false. Second, I want to emphasise that my proposed pragmatically realist conception of truth does not amount to the so-called pragmatic theory of truth according to which a statement is true if and only if acting upon it yields satisfying practical results. Such truth definitions are doomed to fail. Even if a statement, when acted upon, yields satisfying practical results, one can always question the actual truth of the statement. Thus, being useful and being true are different things entirely.

Nevertheless, how we conceive of truth has to do with our different practices and their different conceptualisations. The truth question is important since not all of our conceptualisations of reality work. However, when we raise truth claims about the different aspects of reality, we do so with reference to reality as already conceptualised by other humans. We cannot develop and apply other concepts to reality than those that suit us as the biological and social beings we are.

This does not diminish the plausibility of the claim that any given statement is true if and only if it is the case as it is claimed in the statement. The philosophically crucial question is what conclusion can reasonably be drawn from the concept of truth together with the insight that although reality is more than we can conceptualise, nevertheless, when we talk about reality, i.e. about what is and in what way it is given, we base our discussion on our human situation. In that sense, ontology is dependent on our being the biological and social beings that we are. This means, among other things, that we cannot discuss what we mean by truth and how we decide what is true unless we relate those questions to how we actually learn to distinguish between true and false in our different practices.

Reality for us is always conceptualised reality, conceptualised by means of concepts that humans have developed in their different practices in interaction with reality. Therefore, the pragmatic realist cannot disregard the ways in which we humans actually conceptualise our experiences of reality offering resistance in different ways. Roughly speaking, we can distinguish between observational experiences and existential ones. We experience reality offering resistance, not only empirically but also existentially in the inevitabilities of life such as suffering, guilt and death as well as joy, love and happiness. In the sciences, observational experiences are transformed into knowledge about those aspects of reality which can be examined empirically, knowledge which, in turn, determines how we conceptualise

our observational experiences. However, the circle is not completely closed since unexpected experiences of how reality offers resistance empirically may lead to revisions of a certain way of conceptualising reality in a certain theory, or to the introduction of a new one. Analogously, existential experiences of the inevitabilities of life are in religions and their secular counterparts transformed into insights into what it means to be human, insights that, in turn, determine how we conceptualise our existential experiences in images and narratives. When they cease to be existentially adequate, this may lead to revisions of the existing images and narratives, to new interpretations of them or even to new religions or ideologies.

The pragmatic realist concedes that the metaphysical realist has a point in emphasising our inability to cause truths about reality just by introducing certain concepts. According to the metaphysical realist, the reason why we are unable to do this is that it is reality itself that, independently of language and concepts, determines what statements are true. According to the pragmatic realist, the reason is instead our constant interaction with how reality offers resistance. Referring to the resistance reality offers, the pragmatic realist can maintain that reality is independent of us; however, the pragmatic realist can do so without being forced to say anything about what reality is like, independent of our human perspective. As the biological and social beings we are, with a body, a brain, emotions, knowledge, insights, expectations, values and fears, we interact with reality in different practices, in combination with different conceptualisations of reality. We do this, for instance, in science and in religion, since science and religion are about different experiences of how reality offers resistance.

Humans have developed the sciences on the basis of shared and well-tried observational experiences and the practices with which they are combined. Empirically adequate scientific theories help us say what is true about the observable. Even with regard to the existential experiences and the practices with which they are combined, we have a basis of shared and well-tried experiences. We can perceive when people grieve and we can hopefully provide them with existentially adequate images and narratives. Such images and narratives do not remove the causes of grief but they help people cope with the inevitabilities of life by saying something true about what it means to be human. On the basis of shared and well-tried existential experiences and the practices with which they are combined, we humans have developed religions and political ideologies. If the conceptions, images and narratives

of these religions and political ideologies are existentially adequate, they provide us with insights into what it means to be human.

Seen from this pragmatic realist perspective, the sciences, on the one hand, and the religions and secular ideologies, on the other, have different functions in our lives and thus cannot compete with each other as to which of them can offer the one true description of reality. Nevertheless, in spite of this difference in function, there is an important connection between the sciences, on the one hand, and religions and secular ideologies, on the other. This connection manifests itself when we take into account the fact that we humans, since we are the biological and social beings we are, are also moral subjects, i.e. we are morally responsible for that beings other than ourselves can live a good life.

Religions and secular ideologies help us express our predicament as moral subjects, a predicament which is also characterised by failure. In practice, an individual's concrete moral responsibility for the good life of other beings can only apply to a minority. In order to widen its application, political ideologies are needed. Whether religious or secular, such ideologies help us transform our love of individuals into collective solidarity. This transformation requires knowledge of causal relations. By providing us with such knowledge, the sciences help us make better choices among the possible actions in personal moral responsibility as well as in collective solidarity and thus contribute to the realisation of everybody's right to a good life.

The most common objection to this kind of reasoning is that morality can have this function only when absolute, and that such a foundation is best provided by religion.

According to some religious people there are absolute values, which exist either as such or in the sense of being the essence of the Divine. For example, in Christianity God is love and therefore love is an absolute value. Consequently, there are absolute norms which tell us how to live and what to do. Our statements about morality are made true or false by these values and norms, irrespective of how we conceptualise them and relate to them. This conception of values is problematic, not only because it is part of metaphysical realism, but because it does not take into account the way in which we humans constitute values.

In order to experience certain situations as morally problematic, it is necessary that one should have a sort of sensitivity which requires existential experiences of

sorrow and joy, guilt and happiness, suffering and love—in other words, existential experiences of what it means to be human. It is in the contrast between our ideas of what life should be like when it is at its best and our experience of how flawed life actually is that moral problems arise and ethics as a reflection on them has its place. This contrast, which will exist as long as there are humans, explains why problems concerning morality belong to human life and, consequently, why they cannot be made to disappear. Instead, solving problems about morality means coping with them as responsibly as possible in the very situation in which they arise. The necessary means of conceptualising our ideas of human life when it is at its best, our experience of how flawed human life actually is and, finally, the experienced tension between these two poles, can be found in our different views of life and traditions, religious as well as secular ones, in which we live and by means of which we apply and create images and narratives of what it means to be human. The conceptualisation of values is linked to these conceptualisations in the following way.

Thanks to the images and narratives associated with views of life, we meet the necessary conceptual requirements to experience the tension between life as it could be when it is at its best and life as it actually is. In experiencing this tension, it is possible for us to develop a sense of what is good and evil, right and wrong. The images and narratives associated with our view of life then allow us to conceptualise this feeling and, in this way, to create values. Conversely, once we have accepted the values and cannot experience the given expressions associated with a view of life any longer, we can create new expressions and thereby alter a given view of life, or help see to it that a new one emerges. It is thus a question of interplay. The images and narratives of our views of life show the meaning of our values in more concrete terms and exemplify how the values, thus created by us, can be lived out.

Values are what function as our compass in the use of our knowledge. However, they do so only if they personally involve us as something meaningful. Let me widen the perspective by relating values to the question of the meaning of life.

According to some religious people, the meaning of life relates to the divine aim and it is possible to discover what the meaning of life is. Consequently, in order for the meaning of life to be the meaning in relation to the given aim, it need not be experienced as meaningful. This conception of the meaning of life is problematic, not only because it is an example of metaphysical realism, but because it does not take into account the fact that the conceptualisation of the meaning of life presupposes

human beings with a body, a brain, emotions, knowledge, insights, expectations, values and fears.

As far as I can see, it is by means of the expressions of religions and secular ideologies that we are able to impart insights about what it means to be a human being. However, in this respect, for instance, religious pronouncements are cognitive, not because they are empirically testable, which they are not, but because they constitute expressions for our experience of life's inevitabilities.

Life's inevitabilities imply that there is something that deeply attracts or repels us. When this is the case, we cannot help becoming personally involved. When people speak of the meaninglessness of life, this meaninglessness depends in part on the fact that they are no longer related to something that attracts or repels them, i.e. they no longer feel personally involved. In order for us not to experience meaninglessness, an external requirement is that we should be part of a religious or secular context which provides us with images and narratives about what is valuable. An internal requirement is that something should involve us personally. In order for these requirements to be met, we need access to expressions which can be personally experienced as adequate for expressing what it means to be a human being.

In that regard, there is a two-way connection between emotions and descriptions. My experience of a particular emotion in a particular situation depends in part upon how I interpret the situation which, in turn, depends on the concepts and expressions I have at my disposal. Furthermore, the extent to which I view concepts and expressions as adequate depends on the correlation between my own emotions and the emotions which, on the basis of experiences of what it means to be a human being, have, in certain social and cultural circumstances, been conceptualised in values. In order to relate myself in practice to these values, I need access to the images and narratives of religious or secular views of life in which these values find expression and in which I can recognise myself and the conditions of my own life.

Some of the concepts used in this process are composed of descriptive as well as affective components and incorporate both culturally conditioned and personal experiences. Because such concepts are linked to particular historical, social and cultural contexts, they are forever changing in response to the changes in the contexts and in our social roles and relations to each other. In this process, religious and secular images and narratives play a crucial part both in defending and in criticising the different views of reality and they do so by giving faces to people who, like us,

have to live with life's inevitabilities but, unlike us, live in circumstances with which we are not familiar. In this way, we acquire a better understanding, not only of other people, but also of ourselves and of the ways in which we can live with life's inevitabilities, so that our life is meaningful, irrespective of whether we are religious believers or not.