

**THE MEANING AND THE MYSTERY OF LIFE: RESPONSE
TO AN ARTICLE BY LAURENCE PEDDLE (THINK 33)**

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Laurence Peddle's article 'the Meaning and the Mystery of Life' poses fascinating questions concerning the purpose or non-purpose of life and the interpretation of experience. My response questions his use of terms such as meaning, mystery and life-after-death, and his appeal to Hume on personal identity. Reason per se cannot take us all the way, nevertheless I enumerate reasons for caution in dismissing other people's self-understanding. The link between interpretation of experience and assumptions already held argues strongly for accepting the limits to human knowledge, thus enabling an openness which avoids premature foreclosure whether atheistic or religious.

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Peddle's article in *Think 33* – 'The Meaning and Mystery of Life' – is a courageous piece because it fearlessly examines what most of us sweep under the carpet. Reflection on death is not very popular! It also lays bare the problem which Nietzsche fore-saw, that non-belief in any form of transcendent reality means that there is no ultimate meaning beyond what humans invent for their lives. There are a number of ways, however, in which the discussion can be opened up and the nihilist view of life as 'this voyage to nowhere' challenged.

1. What are we talking about?

Peddle tends to assume that the *meaning of life* should relate to survival after death; otherwise, the fact of death

makes a mockery of life, and our attempts to find meaning through busying ourselves with projects are in the end useless. When there is a lull in activity, when things are not going swimmingly for us, when tragedy happens, a sense of meaninglessness can take over; indeed this may be the worst aspect of suffering. Moreover, moral outrage at the injustice we see in the world makes us feel it must be put right. Terrible happenings cannot be rectified on earth, so the sense of justice seems to require some kind of post-death judgement.

The atheist may secretly envy the resources available to those in deep trouble who happen to believe in some kind of after-life. I know someone who became a paraplegic in a car accident who has told me that it's only her faith in God that keeps her going. Her suffering is not, in her view, the end because she looks forward to what is more important, namely, eternal bliss as well as a righting of wrongs.

Peddle links the word *meaning* with that of the *mystery* of life, but how is mystery to be understood? Is it thought of as a problem to be solved as when we exclaim that something's a mystery, implying that though we cannot understand it now we hope soon to crack it? Or is it rather something which evokes awe and wonder – to be basked in rather than solved? Peddle appears to relate it to what may be described as mystical experience. He refers to several experiences he has had which have caused him to ponder on the possibility of there being something transcendent to natural and human life. Thus he cites his experience on the Gower coast of 'a heightened consciousness of the beauty of sea and sky'. And he acknowledges other luminous moments such as on 'a footpath from Comtown, just by Ewenny Priory' when delight in the wonders of nature became part of the exquisite pleasure of romantic love. He also finds in music powerful indications of something more than just the existence of the molecular world. He finds its claims almost compelling in their own right, as when he speaks of 'listening to the music of Mahler from the film "Death in Venice"'.

There are indeed many pointers towards Mystery understood in the second sense of the word. We do have the capacity for feeling profound awe and wonder of a qualitatively different nature from that associated with solving a problem. Part of such experience is indeed that what faces us awakens our homage, not our skills of detection. Such experiences can bring the joy of a sense of fulfilment yet are matched by great opaqueness. In what do they consist? Are they, or are they not, harbingers of some kind of immortality which would thus automatically seem to convey a meaning to life?

Peddle the thinker has to dispute such a link. He investigates what *immortality* would be like by means of a thought-experiment. The outcome suggested that mere longevity may not provide meaningfulness. It is significant however that for him immortality was conceived of as more of the same. It is important to note that this is not what religious people normally mean by life-after-death. Most would prefer the term *eternal life*. Wittgenstein comes closer to this notion when he wrote of it in the *Tractatus*: 'If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present'. Intense quality of life is a factor in mystical experience, but it can be part of life at any time where there is absolute attentiveness to the present moment – a conviction highlighted, for example, in the writings of Simone Weil.

Those of religious faith see such eternal life as not only experienced dimly now on earth, but as also what happens after death. It is to do with the character or personality which people acquire and which is uniquely theirs. In this world character requires a molecular structure through which to work, but it is believed that in the world to come character can express itself in a different way. John Polkinghorne, a physicist and priest, has suggested an analogy: 'God will download our software onto his hardware until the time he gives us new hardware to run the software again for ourselves.'

This is of course only an analogy which may or may not work for anyone to help widen the scope for enquiry about what is literally ineffable. Traditional notions of *heaven* and *hell* are all of them examples of such picture-language, and many of them are exceedingly unhelpful. Polkinghorne's analogy is far removed from those views of heaven as an orgy of sexual pleasure or hell as of endless torture which have served to ridicule the whole idea of life-after-death.

The concepts of heaven and hell can be viewed quite differently. In C.S. Lewis's intriguing allegory in *The Great Divorce* he depicts heaven as open to anyone who wants to enter. The one condition is that they let go of that self-absorbed self-centredness which cuts them off from the reality outside them. In this sense hell is entirely self-chosen, that is, people decide that they do not wish to partake in that reality; they want only their self-absorbed possession of themselves. As Lewis summarises it: 'There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God "Thy will be done", and those to whom God says "Thy will be done"'. (Collins (1946) 75).

The emphasis here is entirely on character. This is what a person does with the opportunities and difficulties, the talents and the lack of talents, that person has had. If this is what survives, it offers potentially a more convincing notion than the dualistic body-soul dichotomy which appears fraught with difficulty. It can provide a way of holding on to what we intuitively feel, namely, that a person as a person is of inestimable worth and dignity and not to be simply terminated. Aesthetic experience, the experience of love, and a sense of the need for moral justice play important parts in forging character. Belief in eternal life would seem to tie up the ends in what we deeply sense to be a fitting manner.

2. The interpretation of experience – Who am I?

Even if the concept of life-after-death is thus refined, this does not oblige us, however, to see it as a true portrayal of

reality. Invoking the authority of David Hume, as Peddle does, personal identity itself is in dispute. For according to Hume all there is to 'self' is one perception after another falsely imagined by us to convey identity when in fact, just as an old oak tree is not the same as it was when young, it is only the smooth transition from one thought to another over time that is occurring. When Hume experimented with the act of introspection he found that he could not see his 'self' only perceptions.

Yet notably the fact of consciousness was ignored by Hume in his analysis. Consciousness is indeed a vexed issue which stubbornly resists being neatly pinned down. Yet although we cannot see consciousness it is a necessary condition of our life as persons and one which we intuitively all acknowledge. It defines the experience of everyone; indeed it is only through it that we can experience anything. Consciousness is therefore part of our mind but is not dependent on a sense impression or an idea for its existence. The 'self' may therefore be said to be the viewpoint from which we perceive and analyze things. So the fact that I cannot see my 'self' in the way that I perceive impressions of objects and ideas about them doesn't mean that there is no 'self' but only that it cannot be seen in the same way as perceptions. After all, who or what is it that is doing the perceiving? The life-changing experience of the Hindu sage Sri Ramana consisted of his intense engagement with one question 'Who am I?'

Of course it is possible to interpret consciousness as capable of a wholly physical explanation. But note that this is on the basis of an already-held commitment to a naturalist explanation of the world. This naturalism is itself a belief relying on a series of assumptions which cannot be neatly proved correct to anyone else than the person holding them. Oliver Leech in his article on 'Evidence and God' (*Think* 32) notes that a physicalist explanation of consciousness may prove elusive and that many philosophers see the problem of consciousness as 'in principle beyond resolution by the human intellect'. (62). This latter view

implies that an 'irreducible non-physicalism' is possible, and he notes that it can be accommodated by theism in a way that atheism cannot accommodate it (63). He doesn't argue for this but admits its possibility.

Sri Ramana did not interpret his experience in physicalist terms. It may be easy to put this down solely to the Hindu culture around him. Yet this may be to say no more than that the atheist Western philosopher who interprets experience in physical terms without any remainder is also merely reflecting the naturalist worldview and culture which has grown up in the West since the Enlightenment. Western philosophers would resist such a parallel by appealing to reason. Yet their understanding of reason and use of it may be part of their naturalist commitment and itself challengeable.

The appeal to reason can never act as a final arbiter or umpire, for advocates of reason are normally exceedingly prone to disagreeing with each other! This is part of the intoxicating excitement of debate, and it is a potent means of highlighting stupidities in thinking. But the appeal to reason is poor at achieving consensus about fundamental matters because it cannot establish beyond the possibility of challengeability its own premises. Reason is excellent at showing up faulty arguments, but poor at establishing demonstrably sound starting-points for such arguments.

This is because our starting-points necessarily emerge from our whole take on life – what makes sense to us from all the knowledge and experience we have been able to acquire. Just as we think that other people may be mistaken who disagree with us, so we have to acknowledge that we too could be mistaken. Indeed it is normal experience among thinking people to discard or modify many earlier assumptions which they entertained. I well remember my octogenarian father saying that he believed fewer and fewer things now than he had previously, but those left he was more and more sure about. We cannot prove that we are right, but we have no option other than to seek to hold, for ourselves, to what appears to us to be most

plausible. But what is plausible depends upon our total experience of life.

This brings us back again to the question of experience and how it is to be understood. The fact that we cannot demonstrate that a particular description of an experience is correct does not mean that therefore we are all locked up in our particular interpretations impenetrable to reason and discussion. Despite the problems already alluded to of over-reliance on reason, reasons can be given for beliefs even if they remain considerations and not decisive proofs. We need to remember Bertrand Russell's comment: 'Man is a credulous animal, and must believe something; in the absence of good grounds for belief, he will be satisfied with bad ones.' ('Outline of Intellectual Rubbish', in *Unpopular Essays* (1950)) The question here is what constitutes good grounds for belief. There a number of grounds for caution in re-interpreting the experience of others in thought-forms that happen to suit our own.

- (i) It is dangerous and irrational to universalise experience. We are all unique and cannot neatly extrapolate from our own experience to that of others. As Peddle says, interpretation straddles fact and value with its irreplaceable subjectivity.
- (ii) In interpreting experience we are all dependent on the language and cultural notions which we have inherited or to which we have been later introduced. If a particular concept is unknown to us, we cannot use it.
- (iii) The difficulty of expressing something in words to others is colossal. Poetry, music or art may well be needed to begin to convey what an experience was about. When Elgar was asked what his cello concerto was about, he replied 'the meaning of life'. Many other artists, dramatists, poets and novelists might say the same about their greatest works.

Especially does this apply to something as unusual as mystical experience which often takes the person concerned completely by surprise.

- (iv) 'By their fruits ye shall know them' would appear to be a sound criterion for judging psychological normality and integrity. If someone is well-balanced, feet on the ground, open-minded, possessing integrity, why doubt their understanding of their experience? Psychology doesn't tell us to do that, for whilst all humans can be deluded, and are at times, they are not all the time, or even most of the time. Every case has to be decided on its own merits, rather than relying on a blanket dismissal of all claims to awareness of transcendent reality. Anthony Bloom claimed to have a vision of Christ which changed his life. As an atheist teenager wanting to argue with the local priest who expected him to have read one of the gospels, he chose *Mark* as the shortest. But he had hardly started reading before he became aware of the presence of Christ beside the table. The remembrance of that moment stayed with him for the rest of his life. Was he a gullible psychological type? He became a highly competent and sensitive medical doctor, had nerves of steel as a member of the resistance in Paris during WW2, pursued a distinguished academic career as well as becoming an archbishop in the Orthodox church and renowned for his humanity and his open-mindedness. How might those who presume to re-interpret his experience know that they are right? To put the experiences of the mentally depressed, neurotic, naïve, fraudulent, etc., alongside those of very well-

balanced people is to be guilty of unjustified generalisation.

3. The role of assumptions and the need for openness

What undoubtedly is the case is that the world-view that people have influences their interpretation. Peddle was not convinced by his experience of listening to Mahler because of the naturalist world-view to which he was already committed. Peddle assumes a physicalist understanding of life. He states 'that the idea of a hereafter is incoherent, for to be alive is to be corporeal in a physical world'. He couldn't therefore interpret his experience as vouchsafing that 'life has meaning in some profound sense' because he 'noticed a butterfly in difficulties above a windowsill'. The problem of evil intervened which he assumed offers a convincing refutation of the reality of any God. He had spoken earlier of God's 'appalling human rights record'.

It is interesting to compare his experience with one remarkably similar in some ways, outlined by the writer Francis Spufford in a book entitled *Unapologetic: why, despite everything, Christianity can still make surprising emotional sense* (Faber & Faber (2012) 56–64). He can interpret his experience in an entirely different way because of his prior assumptions. These include especially the notion that our radical uncertainty cannot preclude the possibility that there is a transcendent reality under-girding life which in special circumstances can be glimpsed.

A major assumption driving the atheist position is that the only evidence which counts must be empirical. Yet is this not in fact begging the question? If by definition God is not part of the physical world but rather its author, then to assume that only physical evidence can count in reasoning concerning God's putative existence is already to have decided the issue in the way the exercise is set up. To confine *evidence* solely to the empirical sphere has already ruled out the possibility of any evidence for the

Transcendent. The actual question to be debated between the atheist and the theist concerns the nature of evidence.

Moreover, in another sense, to look for scientific proof for God's existence or non-existence by studying the molecular world may be regarded as inept. Wittgenstein used the word 'crazy' to describe this category mistake, for he realised that his beliefs and the beliefs of a religious believer are on different planes. 'If an atheist says "there won't be a Judgment Day", and another person says "there will", do they mean the same? – not clear what criterion of meaning the same is'. (from *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (ed.) C. Barrett (Oxford Blackwell (1967) 57)

Perhaps most of all we need to admit the limitations of our knowledge and not pretend to a certainty which is unjustified. Even regarding the physical world we have to live with uncertainty, as Peddle puts it: 'The sun always rising over an uncertain sea'. If the pursuit of science can never mean total and absolute certainty concerning even the weather, then why should we be surprised at very great uncertainty regarding what may or may not lie beyond the physical world? To pronounce with certainty: 'There is no god and there is no heaven except in the delusions of those who feel that otherwise life has no meaning' would seem to be strange. We all, humanists or religious believers alike, have to acknowledge the reality of uncertainty.

Glendinning in his article on 'beyond Atheism' (*Think* 32) argues for the term 'a-theist non-belief' as opposed to 'atheist disbelief'. He sees the former as a "habitus": the understanding of the world and the significance of your life that characterises the a-theist life in which religion and religious beliefs, for the most part, just do not figure or play a part' 37). He prefers this to the term "atheist disbelief" because it avoids the closed-mindedness and angst against religion of the committed atheist in the latter sense. The default position of a-theist non-belief remains '*in principle* fundamentally open to questions about the existence of God' (52).

Lack of imagination in the sense of seeing possibilities may be critical. Maybe, as Hamlet famously put it: 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy'. In Plato's image of the men entranced in the cave by the shadows they could see on the wall, they failed to perceive that any world outside their cave existed. They were victims of their conditioning, unwilling to explore further or look in a different direction. If we insist that there is no more to life than what we can perceive may we not be suffering from the same myopia? How can we be sure that what we see is all that there is to see?

A powerful allegory that seeks to persuade us to remain open to further possibilities and not be 'slaves to the prejudices of our own dimension', is *Flatland* (Edwin Abbott Abbott (1883)) whose population consists entirely of two-dimensional characters. When a Sphere, a member of a world with three dimensions, seeks to convince a Square of the reality of another dimension, all reasoning and attempted experimentation fails, and only direct experience – through the Square being catapulted into the round world – convinces him. And when he returns to Flatland and tries to convince people there they treat him as a dangerous fool and imprison him. Such is the power of conditioning.

As Banchoff, a mathematician, writes in his Introduction to the book: 'The challenge for us is apparent. Just as a sphere penetrating Flatland is viewed by a Square as a circle growing and then shrinking in time, so also if we were visited by a hypersphere from a space of four dimensions, we might see a sphere growing and then shrinking in time. The ability to treat such a sequence of impressions as the gradual revelation of an entity from a higher dimension is the first exercise for anyone who wishes to accept the challenge of *Flatland*.' He considers that '*Flatland* reduces to absurdity the single-minded tendency of choosing either the totally rationalistic or the totally intuitive.' (Banchoff: Princeton University Press (1991) xxv, xix)

Of course this does not imply the existence of any Transcendent or ultimate dimension. Banchoff sees it

predominantly as an aid towards comprehending the concepts of relativity, multiple dimensions of space, and computer graphics. But it does draw attention to the difficulties we face in even imagining non-molecular reality if such there be, because it will always be possible for us to misread in molecular terms what may properly be interpretable in non-molecular terms. What we do need is openness to the possibility of fresh insight arising from our on-going experience of life. As Glendinning puts it: 'In the end, if those who call themselves atheists are not really open to serious questions about the existence of God, it is not clear that their regular appeal to the need for open-mindedness needs be taken very seriously either; it is nothing more than a scientific pose, and should be treated as such.' (52)

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