Beyond the Material and the Mundane: Spirituality and Transcending

SHARON BAILIN
Simon Fraser University

ABSTRACT: In this paper I explore whether the concept of spirituality can have meaning for me as a secular individual. I begin by arguing that existing attempts to translate the idea of spirituality into secular terms are problematic in a number of ways. Nonetheless, I go on to argue that there is value in some of the ideas invoked in its name, in particular the concept of transcendence. We are beings who go beyond our material situation. We are able to imagine the future, envision possibilities, create ideals, and also to instantiate some of these possibilities, to realize some of these ideals through creative action.

RÉSUMÉ: Dans ce papier, j'analyse le concept «spiritualité» pour savoir s'il signifie «individuel laïque» pour moi. Je commence par soutenir que les essais existants pour traduire le concept «spiritualité» en termes laïques, causent des problèmes dans un certain nombre de domaines. Je persiste cependant à dire qu'à travers l'évocation de son nom, certaines idées ont de la valeur, en particulier le concept de transcendance. Nous sommes des êtres et ces êtres, vont au-delà de la notion de matériel. Nous pouvons imaginer l'avenir, envisager des possibilités, créer des idéaux et aussi concrétiser immédiatement certaines de ces éventualités, rendre réels ces idéaux à travers la créativité.

Introduction

Addressing the topic of spirituality presents, for me, a particular sort of challenge. It is not a topic which has been central to my scholarly interests, and I must admit to investigating this theme in the first instance in response to invitation rather than inspiration. It seems to me that the notion has its natural home in religion, but this is a context in which I am not particularly at home. Indeed, some may consider me orthodox in my secularism. And in the course of my life, both academic and personal, spirituality has been a concept which I have largely managed to do without.

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What might this indicate? I can think of three possibilities. One is that I am missing something. Perhaps there is some aspect of human experience or possibility which has eluded me. Perhaps there is a gap in my life where the spiritual ought to be. A second possibility is that those aspects or qualities which comprise the spiritual are conceived of by me in other terms. Perhaps what is entailed by the concept of spirituality can be captured, without remainder, by such concepts as morality, philosophy, and aesthetics. The third possibility is that there isn't anything there for me, that the concept of spirituality does not have any purchase outside its natural home in religion and cannot have any meaningful referent given a secular worldview. So which is it?

Spirituality in a Religious Context

The concept of spirituality is, at its heart, a religious notion. It arose and developed in the context of religious belief and practice (Carr, 1995) and has as its basis the concept of spirit. The latter refers to some sort of metaphysical entity which is non-material and partakes in a divine element. Although the nature of spirit is elaborated in different ways in different religions, it is generally seen as connected with what is infinite, eternal, and immortal. And the relationship to the divine element is what gives human life meaning and purpose (Carr, 1996). It is, then, a particular type of metaphysical assumption, of a supernatural being or realm, which grounds the idea of spirituality and gives it substance.

Secular Accounts of Spirituality

Despite the religious origins and connections of the notion of spirituality, many theorists have attempted to develop a conception of spirituality which is applicable in secular contexts. It has been pointed out that the term does have non-religious uses, for example "the spirit of the times," (Beck, 1986, p. 150) or "a youth lacking spirit" (Carr, 1995, p. 86), and some theorists have attempted to examine the presuppositions of such usages in order to try to find a conception which transcends the spiritual/secular divide. Such accounts are numerous and vary in their characterizations of spirituality. Nonetheless there are some common themes which arise frequently in the literature. (For a fuller examination and critique of these views, see Bailin, 2002.) The idea of inwardness is one such theme, and is manifested in various forms, including notions of heightened consciousness, intensity of human experience (Egan, 2001), acknowledgement of inner thoughts and

feelings (Rolf, 1991), inner peace (Cully, 1984), or particular feelings such as awe and wonder (Wong, 2001). The focus by some theorists on authenticity and self-knowledge is another manifestation of the emphasis on interiority (Newby, 1996; Priestley, 1985). In some accounts, the inner experience is connected with certain qualities or virtues including awareness, a holistic outlook, wonder, gratitude, love, courage, detachment, and acceptance (Beck, 1986, p. 153); faith, hope, charity, abstinence, forgiveness, and repentance (Carr, 1995, pp. 92-93); integrity, humility, literacy, and fulfillment (Alexander, 2001, p. 150); hope, creativity, awareness, doubt and faith, wonder, awe and reverence (Phenix, 1971, pp. 275-279). Spirituality is frequently also seen as connected with the seeking of transcendence, the search for deep and abiding meaning in one's life. In many theories, spirituality is viewed as a mode of experiencing or knowing, in particular as direct experience unmediated by concepts (Palmer,1999; Glazer,1999; Iannone & Obenauf, 1999). Connectedness and wholeness are also concepts which have an important place in the literature, including connections to one's deepest self, to other human and non-human beings, to the natural world, and/or to larger purposes (Vokey, 2000). Finally, in some conceptions, an ethical dimension grounded in inner values and direct experience is central to what is involved in spirituality (Dalai Lama, 1999).

Critiques of These Views

Such characterizations of spirituality are plagued with many problems. I go into these problems in detail elsewhere (Bailin, 2002) and shall provide only a very brief summary here. First among the problems is that many conceptions do not have a strong conceptual base to give them coherence. They are, as a consequence, so broad and vague that they do not appear to delineate a distinct realm of experience.

Some of the conceptions which focus on inner experience, particularly direct experience, suffer from excessive subjectivism. In not providing standards for evaluating the validity of these inner experiences, they leave open the way for any sorts of ecstatic experiences, including drug-induced or delusional experiences, to be deemed spiritual.

Characterizations in terms of direct knowledge, be it of self, of reality, or of morality, are problematic in viewing such knowledge as unmediated by concepts or reason. These views fail to acknowledge the centrality of concepts, of a public language, and of a social world for our understanding.

Conceptions which are based on certain qualities or virtues also invite criticism. Without a metaphysical grounding in some sort of spiritual realm, it is often not clear why a certain collection of traits qualifies as spiritual. In addition, claims to their universality often do not take into account the culturally specific nature of many of the qualities. Indeed, the question of whether it is even possible to have a view of spirituality which is universal and not embedded in particular traditions or worldviews is one which pervades many of the accounts.

What grounds religious accounts of spirituality and gives them coherence and meaning is the notion of a transcendent spiritual realm (Bailin, 1986, p. 157) and some theorists of a religious orientation argue that such a grounding is a sine qua non of any meaningful conception of spirituality. Thus accounts of spirituality, if they are not grounded in certain metaphysical assumptions, may so distort the meaning of the term that it may be found fundamentally lacking from a religious point of view. On the other hand, any account resting on assumptions of a divine realm or a supernatural being would likely not find acceptance from a secular perspective (Bailin, 2002). Moreover, although the claim is made for some accounts that they are universal and transcend any particular tradition, all such accounts rest on particular metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological assumptions. Many of these assumptions would not be universally accepted (for example of an underlying essence to which we have direct access) (Bailin, 2002).

What I am seeking is a conception of spirituality which is coherent and defensible and has some substantive content in a secular context while still capturing enough of the original meanings of the term to be recognizable to religionists. Many of the conceptions which I have been examining are based, implicitly at least, on metaphysical assumptions which, as a secularist, I find unacceptable. Conceptions which attempt to eschew such a basis tend to be so general as to lose their connection with the original meaning of the concept and to lack conceptual grounding and coherence. Indeed, it is difficult to understand what sense we can make of spirituality without some underlying notion of spirit.

Conceptions of spirituality put forth by some humanists attempt to interpret spirit in secular terms, focusing on the aspirations and achievements of the *human spirit* (Hemming, 1970; Hutcheson, 1994; Huxley, 1927; J. White, 1996). I have considerable sympathy for the kind of focus on human ideals and creations which this view entails. Indeed, it has much in common with the view which I shall be developing shortly. Yet I think that viewing these aspects of human being in terms

of spirituality only confuses the issue. Human spirit is presumably not being used here to refer to a metaphysical entity. Thus its use can only be metaphorical, a metaphor parasitic upon religious/metaphysical uses. But its meaning in this context is quite different from what religionists generally mean by spirituality. And there are other ways to refer to these aspects (ideals, aspirations, values, creations) which do not have their basis in unacceptable metaphysical assumptions.

The preceding arguments tend to lead me towards the conclusion that an acceptable (for me) conception of spirituality is not forthcoming. Does that mean that I must concede the third possibility outlined at the beginning of the paper – that there is nothing for me in the concept of spirituality? I think that such a conclusion may be somewhat premature.

Transcending

To say that, in a secular context, the concept of spirituality is more problematic than it is helpful is not to deny the value of some of the ideas which are invoked in its name. One of these is the notion of transcendence. Many theorists draw a connection between spirituality and transcendence. According to Beck, for example, spirituality "looks 'beyond man' – to nature, the environment, the totality of things, the unknown, the ideal, the ever-receding 'something more' which give transcendence to human experience" (Beck, 1986, p. 155). And Carr states that "spiritual values and the dispositions they entail are ... focused upon those aspects of human experience which look beyond the material and mundane towards what is immutable, eternal, infinite, invisible and immortal" (1995, p. 98).

From a religious perspective, transcendence of the "material and mundane" is available through participating in the realm of the divine, and some theorists seem to limit its meaning to this use. Taylor, for example, in his argument for the existence of a universal human need for transcendence, seems to be using "transcendent" as synonymous with "supernatural" and "immanent" as synonymous with "natural" (Taylor, 2001).

Yet the notion of transcendence is comprehensible to a secularist as well. The term has a perfectly ordinary meaning in terms of going beyond (e.g., transcending one's circumstances), and such a usage is not dependent upon any metaphysical assumptions. (I prefer, where possible, to speak of "transcending" rather than "transcendence" to avoid any possible metaphysical reification.) Moreover, one does not need to

adhere to some form of religion in order to believe that we are not confined to "the material and mundane." Although all human capacities and possibilities may be grounded in our physical constitution, there is an important, existential sense in which we are not reducible to atoms and molecules. We have ideals and imagine possibilities, we create aesthetic objects, and we fashion lives replete with meaning, both individually and collectively.

These possibilities appear to be grounded in our condition as conscious, self-aware, intentional beings. As such, we are aware of our condition in the world, including our mortality, and we seek to make sense of it. We can imagine a future, envision possibilities, and we are able to realize them (to some extent, at least) through creative action. Thus we, as human beings, have the possibility of transcending the givenness of our circumstances.

There are, however, different aspects and levels to what is entailed in imagining a future, ranging from trivial everyday acts of planning (e.g., what we will wear tomorrow) to significant and grand visions and creations (e.g., writing an opera or imagining a future without war). Similarly, the possibilities we envision for ourselves and the world may be highly positive (e.g., ways to enhance the lives of others) or they may be extremely destructive (e.g., ways to exterminate masses of people). Thus it is important to make clear that my notion of transcending has an explicitly normative dimension. Because of our human capacities to imagine and create, we are capable of creations which can contribute to human flourishing. Because we can imagine, we can imagine better ways – this is part of what is entailed in the notion of ideals. It is this type of transcending which is of interest here.

The definitions of transcendence cited at the beginning of this section make reference to something "beyond man," something which is "'immutable, eternal, infinite, invisible and immortal." To what extent is this a necessary feature of transcending? The account of transcending that is being developed is very much grounded in the nature and condition of human beings and does not make an appeal to any other being, entity, or totality. Yet it does speak to the ways we are more than atoms and molecules, the ways we go beyond "the material and mundane." The kinds of visions and ideals at issue, as well as the works which embody them, are eminently human creations. This fact does not, however, negate their reality or power.

Seeking Meaning

The possibility for transcending is related to our condition as self-aware beings who seek to understand the world and our condition. We seek to find and/or create meaning in the world and in our lives. J. White (1994) worries that this notion of meaning could slip in a religious assumption in suggesting that our lives have a purpose beyond themselves. I believe, however, that all this claim need amount to is the idea that we seek to make sense of our lives, discover what is important, and find values to live by. We do not need to appeal to any metaphysical sense of meaning grounded in an external power.

In contrast to this notion of externally grounded meaning, much contemporary educational and spirituality discourse focuses on personal meaning, felt meaning, and meaning-making. In this type of discourse, meaning is viewed as an inner, subjective phenomenon, something which is discovered or created by the individual in direct interaction with the world. It has, however, been famously argued, by Wittgenstein in particular, that meaning is, in part at least, a public possession grounded in a shared language and way of life (1968). Thus meaning, although having an inward facet, cannot be an entirely internal phenomenon. As Alexander puts it, "if meaning in general requires public rules, then meaning in life requires concern for that which lies outside of me" (2001, p. 145). If this is the case, then criteria can plausibly be offered for evaluating meaning. Puolimatka and Airaksinen argue, for example, that, in addition to being authentic for the individual, meaning should be rationally justifiable, consistent with external reality, non-trivial, and capable of being communicated to others (Puolimatka & Airaksinen, 2001, pp. 311 – 322).

Human beings have historically developed traditions of inquiry and creation which embody their struggles to make sense of the world and the human condition. An important dimension of exploring meaning involves understanding these traditions and making a personal connection between them and one's own quest for meaning and ways to live. These traditions take many forms. Certainly the religions of the world and the great philosophical traditions constitute primary fora in which issues of the nature of the cosmos and the meaning of existence have been explored. The arts are centrally important in this regard (and more will be said about them in due course). And, since transcending has to do with the ways we go beyond the material to create understanding, then other traditions of inquiry would qualify as well, including the various humanities and the physical and human sciences.

It may seem that, in emphasizing our public traditions and endeavours, I have moved far away from the notions of inwardness and experience which are central to many characterizations of transcendence. It is not my intention to deny the importance of interiority. Indeed, I think that certain kinds of feelings and experiences are central to what transcending is all about. What I want to deny, however, is that such experiences can be seen solely in terms of individual subjectivity viewed apart from culture, concepts and language. What we experience subjectively and what we understand conceptually are, on the contrary, closely intertwined.

By way of illustration, let us look at an example, described by Wong (2001), of how, as a child, he was inspired to feelings of awe and wonder by contemplating the infinity of space. (He also cites a similar example from Popper's autobiography.) Such experiences cannot, however, be solely the result of direct contact with the phenomenon (in this case the immediate perception of the sky). Awe and wonder at the infinity of space presuppose some conceptual understanding of the properties of space and of the concept of infinity. It is unlikely that the ancients, for whom the sky was a solid dome, experienced awe and wonder in this way at viewing the sky. Experiences of awe and wonder presuppose a recognition of the complexity and wonderousness of the world and the puzzlement and paradox of our situation within it. Perhaps a useful way to think about the inner dimension of transcendence is in terms of profound appreciation. This implies a recognition of and sensitivity to the puzzlement and wonderment of our situation, an openness to the great virtues and powerful emotions inherent in the quest for understanding, and a recognition of the possibilities for profound personal meaning afforded by this quest. There is also, inherent in the notion of appreciation, some sense that we are appropriately moved. One hears complaints about the disenchantment of the world resulting from the proliferation of the scientific/rational worldview. Yet some forms of 'enchantment' are simply ignorance, superstition and mystification. What transcending (in the sense being developed here) entails is awe and wonder based on knowledge and understanding, including the appreciation of the limits of our knowledge and understanding.

Some theorists have taken the insight regarding the centrality of public traditions for meaning to the point of arguing that a 'vision of the good' and a meaningful life can only be had within the confines of particular communities which enjoy shared beliefs and practices (especially but not exclusively religious communities) (Taylor, 2001;

Alexander, 2001). But I think that this argument fails to recognize that, particularly in the modern world, communities are often eclectic and mixed. We are often a part of many communities, and, to some extent at least, we choose and reject participation in particular communities. In terms of engaging in a meaningful exploration of understanding, we may want to be involved in a dialogue amongst particular communities, and to attempt to see ourselves as part of a broader community, the human community.

Transcending involves more than our propensity to seek understanding of the way things are and to make sense of our current situation. It involves, as well, our ability to imagine the future, to envision possibilities , and to create ideals. We are beings possessed of imagination, which means that we are able to think of things "as possible being so" (A.White, 1990, p. 184). Thus we are able to recognize problems and limitations in current circumstances and imagine how things might be better. Along this line, Phenix views transcendence, which he defines as "the experience of limitless going beyond any given state or realization of being," (Phenix, 1971, p. 272) as inherent in the nature of consciousness. He states, "To say that persons are beings with spirit is to point to their perennial discontent and dissatisfaction with any and every finite realization" (p. 272). Similarly for Alexander, the possibility of transcendence is connected with our fallibility. It is based on a recognition that our perspective is necessarily limited, that there are always other places, times, and ideas. Thus there is the constant possibility that there is a better way (Alexander, 2001, p. 145).

Our possibility for transcending lies not only in our ability to imagine possibilities and envision possible futures. We are also able to instantiate some of these possibilities, to realize some of these ideals. Thus we can transcend aspects of our situation through creative action. In this vein, Dewey refers to spirituality in terms of the active striving to unite the ideal and real (Garrison, 2001, p. 114) and Nussbaum captures this idea thus: "Human beings make the world, and make themselves in the world, through politics, through science, through teaching, through personal love, through virtuous speech and action" (1990, p. 381). And, importantly, through art.

Art

Although our creative actions take many forms, I shall focus here on art because I believe that it holds a special place vis a vis transcending. Creating art has been and continues to be a primary means through

which human beings embody meaning, envision possibilities, and create the world and themselves. And I believe that art has such a powerful connection with transcending because of the nature of its expression: the media of expression are highly sensuous and the form of the expression constitutes a crucial aspect of the meaning. For this reason the arts are able to "bridge the expressible and the inexpressible; they display for deliberation feelings and experiences that lie beyond the limits of ordinary language" (Alexander, 2001. p. 50). (By this I do not intend to indicate that art does not involve conceptual understanding, but only that the richness and fullness of what is expressed cannot be adequately captured within the limitations of ordinary language.) Similarly, Carr argues that, in order to apprehend the transcendent, it is necessary to go beyond the bounds of literal description and use sign, archetype and symbol which have the power to "engage more directly with the deeper affective and motivational centre of human life and experience" (Carr, 1995, p. 96). He further points out that both religion and art speak the language of myth and metaphor, analogy and allegory, parable and poetry.

Because the arts constitute a primary means through which people explore meaning and imagine possibilities, they play a significant role in the creation of ideals. Greene argues, for example, that the arts may move us into spaces where "we can create visions of other ways of being and ponder what it might signify to realize them" (1995, p. 112). Nussbaum similarly argues that good literary works illustrate in vivid detail the range of human possibilities and pitfalls, and show us "in rich detail, as formal abstract argument cannot, what it is like to live a certain way" (1990, pp. 227-228). And Garrison makes the point thus: "Poetry as *poesis* may serve moral purposes by intervening in the world; it may disclose ideal possibilities and awaken desires. In poetry, we may catch our first glimpse of what ought to be, the good beyond what actually exists" (2001, p. 117). And: "Unless one can see the possible in or beyond the actual, they cannot frame a moral ideal of what ought to be: they are slaves to the actual" (p. 118).

Some artists, although they are not specifically interested in religion or otherworldliness, may nevertheless aim at transcendence. As Nussbaum points out, both James and Proust "compare excellent literary works to angels that soar above the dullness and obtuseness of the everyday, offering their readers a glimpse of a more compassionate, subtler, more responsive, more richly human word. That is a view about transcendence" (1990, p. 379).

The role of the arts goes beyond simply envisioning possibilities, however. They can also play a role in their actualization. The aesthetic is sometimes set in contrast to the anaesthetic, the latter referring to what numbs people and keeps them confined to everyday preoccupations, routines, and conventions. According to Greene, the arts have the capacity to defamiliarize experience, to disrupt what is taken as given, and to reveal what would ordinarily not be seen (Greene, 1988, pp. 128-129). Murdoch puts the point thus: "Art ... reveals to us aspects of our world which our ordinary dull dream-consciousness is unable to see. Art pierces the veil and gives sense to the notion of a reality which lies beyond appearance" (1970, p. 87). Thus encounters with the arts can shock us into an awareness which leaves us less immersed in these preoccupations and prompts us to wonder, to question, and sometimes to act. "They open our eyes, they stir our flesh, they may even move us to try to repair" (Greene, 1995, p. 118).

The type of transcending manifested in art is a specifically human form of transcending. Through the creation of works in the world, human beings seek to give expression to their imaginings, give form to what is significant, and contribute to the creation of the world that will follow.

But art can also contribute to an inner type of transcending. The products of human imagination have an existence apart from and beyond the individuals who create them, and become vital aspects of the way we see our future and ourselves. Art changes us. Nussbaum describes this as "transcending by *descent*, delving more deeply into oneself and one's humanity, and becoming deeper and more spacious as a result" (1990, p. 379).

It seems to me, then, that the notion of transcending picks out some fundamental aspects of our humanness related to our ability to make something of our material circumstances, to imagine positive, productive futures and to realize such possibilities through creative action. Thus, although a secular notion, it has connections with some of the insights of the literature on spirituality.

Conclusion

To conclude, let me return to the lacuna in my spiritual experience which I described at the outset and to the three possibilities which I offered for its explanation. One possibility is that, in having no acquaintance with the spiritual, I am missing some important aspect of experience. The second possibility is that those aspects or qualities

which comprise the spiritual are conceived of by me in other terms. And the third possibility is that, as a secular individual, there is nothing for me in the notion of spirituality.

Let me begin with the possibility that some aspect of human experience has eluded me. Now if, by spirituality, one is necessarily referring to experience involving a supernatural dimension, then I cannot lay claim to spiritual experience. But as someone who does not believe in the reality of such experience, I cannot conclude that I am missing something. There are, however, some ideas referred to in broader conceptions of spirituality which I can make sense of, in particular the notion of transcendence and all that entails in terms of the exploration of meaning, the quest for understanding, the envisioning of possibilities, the creation of ideals, and creative action in the world. Thus it would not be entirely correct to conclude that there is nothing connected with the concept of spirituality to which I can relate. Nonetheless, these aspects of the human condition tend to be encompassed for me within other concepts, for example the aesthetic, the moral, the philosophical, the psychological, and so forth. I do not think that we need the concept of spirituality to talk about them. The concept of spirituality is, I think, too much rooted in a metaphysics based on spirit to be meaningful in a context where such a view is not accepted.

The ways in which we transcend our material condition are, however, of central importance, both philosophically and educationally. Going beyond "the material and the mundane" is fundamental to what it means to be human.

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Sharon Bailin is a Professor in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University. Her research focuses on philosophical issues related to creativity, critical thinking, and aesthetics and arts education. She is the author of *Achieving Extraordinary Ends: An Essay on Creativity* and numerous articles on these topics. She currently holds a SSHRC research grant for a project on creativity across cultures.

Author's Address:
Faculty of Education
Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, B.C.
CANADA V5A 1S6
EMAIL: Sharon_Bailin@sfu.ca