

People

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(Translation into English)

No people are uninteresting.
Their fate is like the chronicle of planets.

Nothing in them is not particular,
and planet is dissimilar from planet.

And if a man lived in obscurity
making his friends in that obscurity,
obscurity is not uninteresting.

To each his world is private,
and in that world one excellent minute.

And in that world one tragic minute.
In any man who dies there dies with him

his first snow and kiss and fight.
It goes with him.

There are left books and bridges
and painted canvas and machinery.
Whose fate is to survive.

But what has gone is also not nothing:
by the rule of the game something has gone.
Not people die but worlds die in them.

Whom we knew as faulty, the earth's creatures.
Of whom, essentially, what did we know?

Brother of a brother? Friend of friends?
Lover of lover?

We who knew our fathers
in everything, in nothing.

They perish. They cannot be brought back.
The secret worlds are not regenerated.

And every time again and again
I make my lament against destruction.

Most people brought up in modern Ireland would have had exposure to religious instruction (in school as well as probably at home), and usually of a Christian character,

was also an anti-hero in the spectre of the Devil who was a perpetual threat to those wishing to remain in a state of grace (i.e. free from sin). People were born with original sin

PROMETHEUS AGONISTES Against Antiphysicalism

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh

whether Catholic or Protestant.

The worldview thus given to such pupils was a dichotomy of the spiritual and the physical. They were told that there was a natural and a supernatural.

In the second instance, this meant that they had an immortal soul which was destined to end up in hell or heaven, perhaps undergoing, prior to the latter, a punitive disinfection in the cleansing centre of purgatory. At the core of the supernatural was a personal God who was infinite, omniscient and omnipotent. There

and basically remained sinners throughout their lives, albeit entitled to repetitive absolution or forgiveness, depending respectively on whether you were a Catholic or a Protestant.

Life was depicted as a valley of tears in contrast to the bliss of heaven, which awaited those who died free from mortal sin, and wherein they could cohabit with God for having mostly adhered to his commandments. This all amounted to a superior realm of the spiritual.

PHYSICALITY & SEXUALITY

Instruction also took place in attitudes towards the natural and its physicality, with a decided emphasis on the sexual. The here and now of physical existence was of course ephemeral. It was also not only inferior to the spiritual, but tainted with the corruption of sin. The body in particular was subject to decay through age and death, and was a source of constant temptation in life. Holy purity was ever under threat. This normally began with 'impure' thoughts and masturbation. Not only was the latter sinful, but the wasting of one's 'precious bodily fluids' could have dire consequences such as blindness - according to the more bizarre warnings of some latter-day clerics. Sex was something for marriage alone and then was to be free from artificial contraception and thus chiefly for the purpose of reproduction. It was not to be foremostly for pleasure. In this, Christians were actually according with raw nature's intent, although they framed it in terms of God's law.

CHRISTIAN TEACHINGS

The acutely disparaging view of the physical and personal world goes back a long way. In Christianity, it has had many contributors, particularly Tertullian, Origen (who is alleged have castrated himself) and St Jerome, but the most forceful and lasting impacts on this Christian mindset came from St Augustine and St Paul.

St Augustine's father was a pagan and his mother a Christian who urged him in that direction. Yet in early manhood he led what today would be called a liberal life style, among other things siring an illegitimate son. He nonetheless was interested in philosophy and became an adherent of Manichaeism with its dualistic dogma of a good spiritual world and an evil physical one, stress being laid on the abomination of the flesh. But he was also attracted by the Neoplatonism of Plotinus and Porphyry. In time, he came back to Christianity, bringing unmistakable traces of Manichaeism and Platonism with him, and went on to synthesise the latter with the fundamentals of his new-found faith. He is especially credited with consolidating the idea of original sin whereby, along with Adam and Eve, we are to be seen as



Praying and Flagellating

fallen and lustful creatures in need of salvation. Therefore, life is a sojourn of atonement.

St Paul likewise diminished the physical world and specifically sexuality. His teachings were, among other things, inhibitionist, sexist, and homophobic. For him, celibacy was the preferred state for all although, happily regarding continuation of the species, not so chosen by everybody. Apart from his ideological views, it has been suggested that his perspectives emanated to an extent from his own medical condition. He was known to have had a persistent illness, and a number of neurologists studying Paul's description of his Damascene conversion, and 'visions' otherwise, have suggested that he might have suffered from temporal lobe epilepsy, which could well explain the episodes in question.¹ Apart from such an infliction having a possibly destabilising effect on his general mental state, he has also been construed as a guilt-ridden homosexual by certain scholars, most famously Episcopal Bishop Spong of the US in his book *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, all on the basis of modern psychological analysis of Pauline pronouncements.² If the foregoing is accurate, it is altogether hardly a healthy basis for pronouncing on the morality of a just life.

ANTIPHYSICALISM

Anti-physicalism is what one might call this entire Christian outlook, encompassing as it does both self-deprecation and a generally jaundiced view of the material world. However, antiphysicalism had its predecessors going back a long way before Christianity, which was appreciably shaped by them.

We have already noted a Platonic effect on St Augustine. Plato in his own right taught that we were trapped in our bodies and in an imperfect world which was far short of transcendent Ideals (he called them Forms). We were diverted from the true reality, and passion could subvert reason. The Ideals, however, existed eternally and unchangingly in their flawlessness. In this construction, he was in turn swayed by the Orphic and Pythagorean traditions.

The Orphics were so-called because their

¹ For example, D Landsborough, *Journal of Neurology etc*, June 1987.

² Also, Arthur Darby Nock, *Saint Paul*, Harper & Bross, 1938.

Jay Parini, Middlebury College [US], 'The (Possibly) Gay, Elite Apostle etc', *The Daily Beast*, 2019.

inspirator was the (probably mythical) poet-diviner Orpheus. Becoming prominent around the 6th century BCE, they were a sharp alternative to the frenzied and sensuous ceremonies of the immemorial Dionysian cults, and subscribed to a theistic attachment to Apollo. The world was perceived by them as full of behaviours that were considered reprobate. The goal was to overcome such earthly limitations and ensure access to eternal life. However, this initially involved death and rebirth.

The Pythagoreans had a definite historical basis in the figure of Pythagoras. Pythagoreanism, arising in the same period as the Orphics, also involved the preaching of an austere life. They thought that, as punishment for offenses, the soul was buried in the body, which served as a tomb for it. Again, they held to a cycle of reincarnation before one could join in the company of the gods. Additionally, they were vegetarians with the aim of having a healthy body that assisted, by way of purification, in seeking spiritual enhancement. What notably distinguished them was their mathematised interpretation of almost everything. And they were more ethically developed than the Orphics.



Orpheus

EASTERN CONNECTIONS

It is quite probable that, in relation to both the Orphics and the Pythagoreans, there was cultural cross-fertilisation between the Greeks and the denizens of north India. Included in the traditions of the latter were the Sramanyas and Vratyas. Both these tendencies were ascetic, the main distinction being that the first lived in the community, while the second chose isolation. There were also the analogous Sannyasas who were more integrated into the Vedic stream. And all of them also believed in reincarnation. These influences on the Greeks probably resulted from both the contacts of travellers between the two areas concerned as well as transmission of ideas otherwise. In particular, cultural infiltration either way must be allowed for as usual through trading activity. One further recalls that, during the era of Alexander the Great alone, his armies advanced as far as the Indus along with various camp followers. And it should be remembered that the Greeks and north Indians both derived from the Indo-Europeans (aka Aryans) and thus had a common underlay of primitive religious attitudes. One might

further remark that many such interactions would have occurred within the Axial Age (8th-3rd century BCE), as proposed by Karl Jaspers, consisting of significant intellectual emergences in the same broad timeframe across major Eurasian civilisations.

NEGATIVITY

While antiphysicalism thus stretches back to ancient times, in the Christian era it became particularly negative with its portrayal of the physical as being not only lowly and a distraction from the spiritual, but also thoroughly unclean and repulsive. This was manifest especially among the

Gnostics and was joined on the periphery of Christianity by the Manichaeism already referred to. Indeed, by the time of the Puritans even bodily functions were viewed by some as repellent. Antiphysicalism thus frequently transmogrified into a pathological self-loathing.

But, all this being said about both the origins and the subsequent evolution of anti-physicalism as we encounter it today in Christianity, the basic question arises as to why an antiphysicalist cast of mind was ever formed by some humans at any stage and in any shape.

PREDISPOSITIONS

The fact is that humans have an inherent disposition to aspire to the ideal. This drives us on to seek constant advance and improvement. It is also the bedrock of the vision of progress which was fully articulated during the Enlightenment of the late 17th century and throughout the 18th and beyond. It encompasses not only the practical, but also the aesthetic. We have as well a deep yearning for beauty, and the less than beautiful aspects of life at times led, throughout history, to escapism in search of the quintessential regarding this, and more latterly to a twisted reaction of disdain for our very existence.

What happened with self-abnegation (*in extremis*, involving auto-injury) was that, in certain cases, the aspirations to idealism and aestheticism grossly overreached themselves and became alienated from living experience through being transcendentalised into a fantasised spiritual sphere. In other words, anti-physicalism consists of ethereal idealism and aestheticism that are portrayed as in conflict with humanity, instead of there just being intellectual models of these

dimensions which inspire us. At its most benign, this predilection towards sublimity saw the physical as a deflection from celestial paragons and numinous beauty. More malignly, it simply denigrated the material, the vital, and the earthly. All in all, it has often wreaked havoc with human contentment in many ways. Instead of encouraging self-confidence and trying to make the best of this world, people were induced to feel basically inadequate or severely guilty and not infrequently driven to actual neurosis.

But, one is not unaware that what probably contributed to these phenomena were the shocking sights of misery and destitution that characterised much of the premodern age before medicine and science in general forced back disease, poverty and natural disasters. What Siddhartha Gautama saw when he ventured out of his palace in Nepal led him to becoming the Buddha.³ What Jesus of Nazareth witnessed and reacted to when he travelled in Palestine likely contributed to him being depicted as the Christ.⁴

MORBID SEXUALITY

Remaining to be scrutinised is the morbid obsession with sexuality. This probably arose because it is the second most powerful instinct after the will to live insofar as the species has to be reproduced. Constant desire and passion were seen to become the seductive enemies of, first, reason and, then, the attainment of pure idealism and pure aestheticism. This propensity also fused with a disgust which viewed the sexual act as singularly sordid. Relatedly, there was the deep shame about the body *au naturel*. Nudity could not be tolerated and one suspects that there was often a run on fig leaves after reading the Book of Genesis.

A further element at times in antiphysicalism seems to have been that of sadomasochism. And this is to be described not least in the religious fixation with the so-called Passion of Christ. We are presented with the picture of a largely unclothed figure dragging the wooden beams for his execution up the hill of calvary while 'crowned' with thorns and being whipped all the way before being nailed to a cross. An almost naked figure is then speared in the side and offered a vinegared sponge to 'quench' his thirst. This spectacle is

gloatingly depicted in a quasi-obscene manner by some Christians, with their churches having as their centre-piece the crucifixion image of torture. Insofar as Christians often underline the messages of love, peace and fellowly equality, one wonders why the preferred image is not instead that of Christ giving the sermon on the mount. But, of course, the crucifixion is linked to the unhinged idea of our sinfulness and the resultant need for expiation, and for redemption as offered by the martyred son of God.

HUMANISTS & ANTIPHYSICALISM

Antiphysicalism is something which Humanists clearly spurn. They see the world, with all its faults, as the sum total of what we have to live in, and therefore should work to enhance our environment at all levels. This does not thus mean fatalism and indeed involves a mature idealism and aestheticism that we ourselves create in order to enthuse us and incline towards. Original sin, perpetual sinfulness and sexual guilt are repudiated as unhealthy ideas which undermine human happiness. They are also linked to forlorn hopes of an afterlife that lead to the undervaluing of what we have, actually and potentially, and often to acquiescence in the face of oppression and injustice.

There should be no cavilling by Humanists that one rejects both the original sin concept of Christians with all its implications, and the strains in Hinduism along with its Buddhist offshoots, which assert the insubstantiality of life and seek no less than erasion of the self. Further East, the naturalism of classical Daoism and the humanism of Confucianism are philosophically more congenial, although in need of progressive and critical qualification. Consequently, in the first instance, one ought to appreciate nature but not acquiesce in it; in the second, one should not only conserve the good but also liberate from the patriarchal. As for the other major global religion of Islam, like *Unitarian* Christianity it is not wedded to the teachings of the trinity or original sin. But it is akin to other Christian attitudes of repressiveness in human conduct, which is not surprising as Islam is one of the three branches of the Abrahamic tree including, as these do, Judaism as well.

However, we must recall that while antiphys-



³ Enlightened

⁴ Anointed

icalsim may have primordial beginnings and historic adherents, so do the shoots of secularity and Humanism.

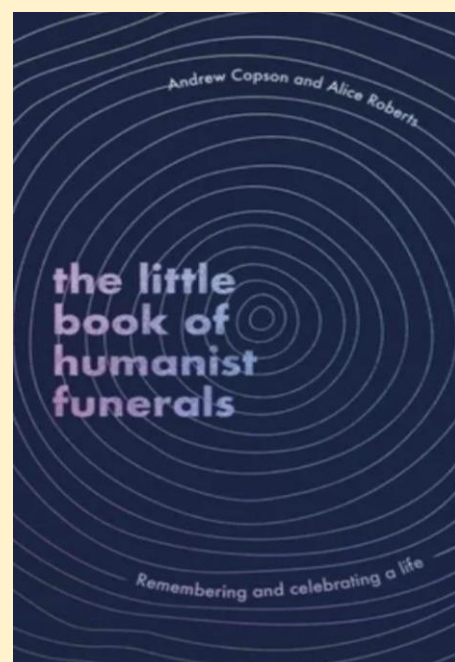
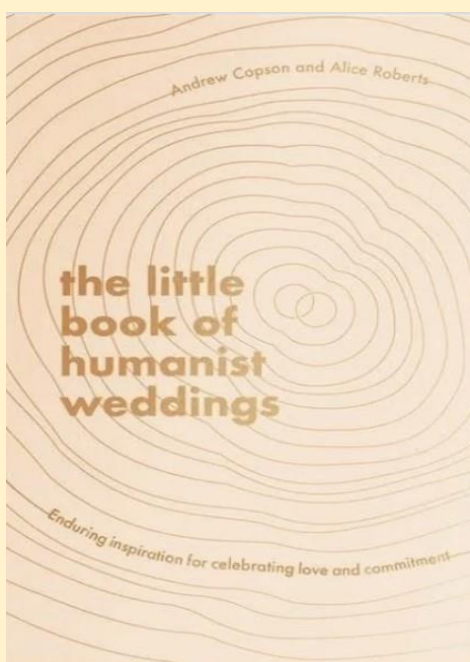
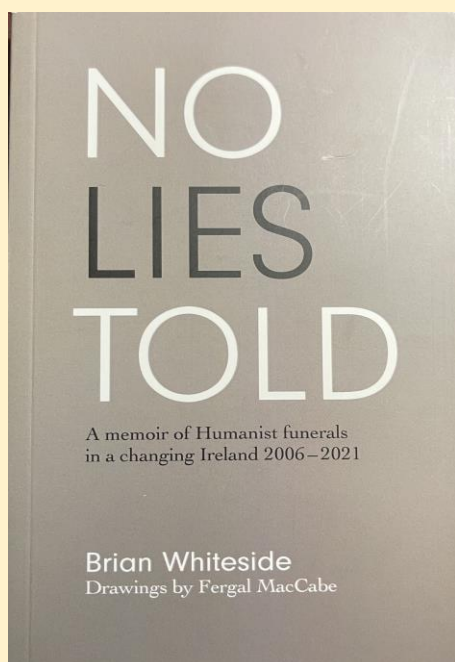
Protagoras said that “man is the measure of all things”, Leucippus and Democritus saw the world primarily as atomistic, the Milesian School was also largely materialistic in its own ways, Empedocles and Heraclitus likewise in theirs, Epicurus affirmed life in all its fullness on earth, Diagoras of Melos was reputed to be an outright atheist, and Aristotle significantly parted ways with his teacher Plato; he did not accept the ‘Forms’ or that there was an immortal soul caged in an earthly body, while instead of a god he spoke of an ‘unmoved mover’ that was more of an abstract force.⁵ The Roman epoch was obviously marked by Lucretius and his relay of Epicureanism. Certain manifestations of at least scepticism continued throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. But, it was not until the Enlightenment that thinkers such as Hobbes, Hume and Baron d’Holbach either discounted or dismissed the spiritual, in the latter case expressing unadulterated atheism.

In the Vedic tradition, there are the materialist schools of the Lokayata or Charavaka. They asserted the primacy of sensual perception and renounced the gods, karma and an afterlife. Their attitude to pain and pleasure was virtually Epicurean. The Tantric Maithuna practices specifically seek transcendence through sexual intensity,

while the Kamashastra texts concentrate in like manner and unapologetically on pleasure, at the same time linking this to an ethical outlook. Zarathustrians regard the body as Ahura Mazda’s positive creation and practise ritual ablution as a sign of respect, thus not classifying the corporeal as contaminated; their response to sex is one of moderation and marital fidelity, but not mired in aversion. Their creed is summed up by them as ‘good thoughts, good words, good deeds’ - far from the angst of Christianity. One ponders what life would have been like if the Emperor Constantine had endorsed Zarathustra rather than Jesus.

PROMETHEAN CONTEST

The Being of humanity is such that it incessantly strives to rise above itself. This can lead to credulity as regards a divine, whereas the realisation of Being in fact lies in the gradual fulfilment of human potential. In particular, religious antiphysicalism, in one form or another, is a deviation that has been with us for a very long time, but not exclusively so. In Promethean fashion, it has been contested from the word go. The truly civilized and cultured live in creative harmony with nature at all levels and eschew false existential conflicts. It has not therefore been all one way in the history of the human race. There have always been other and more sane ways.



⁵ Several of the Greeks concerned would not have been explicitly atheist, but their attitude seems to have been either just Deistic in the 18th century sense or perhaps a case of under-

standable social caution about denying the gods. Likewise for some of the Enlightenment philosophes.