

ENTREVISTA

Interview with Andrew Pinsent, Director of the Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion, University of Oxford.

Q1: Is 'transcendent' a popular word for metaphysical issues?

Contemporary philosophy will sometimes refer to the transcendent, but it is not a very popular word for many philosophers today. One reason is that the word is vague, being defined as going beyond the normal and physical. The word is therefore defined by what it is not but lacks positive content in itself. Without this additional clarification the study of transcendence is therefore challenging. Another reason is due to the long-term impact of philosophers such as David Hume (d. 1776) and Immanuel Kant (d. 1804). One practical consequence of their work, and others of the so-called Enlightenment, was to set limits around human thought, limits that excluded consideration of transcendence.

Nevertheless, metaphysics means “after physics” and fact remains that there are still topics to study once all empirical investigations have been carried out. One example is the nature of causation. Another example is the basis of ethical reasoning. Hence, despite some contemporary problems and prejudices, there is still a great need for metaphysics. This fact means that philosophy is still and will remain a discipline that investigates transcendence.

Q2: How does your work involves the reflection on the transcendent?

I have been very fortunate. Originally, I trained in physics, the most transcendent science, and I became a particle physicist working at CERN. I also spent eight years studying philosophy, which is about the transcendent accessible to natural reason. I am also a Catholic priest, and the central idea of the Catholic faith is that the ultimate transcendent, who is God, has become flesh, and hence knowable and lovable. My work for many years has therefore involved reflection on the transcendent, from complementary perspectives.

Q3: Is there place for transcendence or the transcendent in the contemporary world?

Yes, I think there is and has to be a place for transcendence in the contemporary world, at least if the contemporary world is to be a good place for human beings to live. The reason I make this claim is that all human beings are ultimately dissatisfied

with the world presented to our senses and we seek something beyond, something that is transcendent.

As evidence, consider how the advertising industry exploits the human desire for transcendence, both in my country and in Latin America. I once found a packet of biscuits offering me “snacking Nirvana.” I once found a yogurt called “Bliss,” and a cheese called “Heaven.” In Brazil in particular, advertisers also make extensive use of images and language that evoke sex as a transcendent experience. The advertisers know that we human beings seek a happiness beyond present satisfaction, in other words that we have a natural desire for transcendence, and they use this desire for the transcendent to sell their products.

Q4: Is the transcendent an issue in the science and religion debate?

The transcendent is an issue in the science and religion in at least two main ways. First, in a negative sense, especially over the past three centuries, there is a fairly constant effort to try to exclude consideration of the transcendent. For example, many books associated with the so-called Enlightenment, such as *Religion within the Limits of Pure Reason*, begin by setting limits on what we can know. This school often seeks to co-opt science for support, despite the focus of science being transcendent, at least implicitly, as well the fact that many of the greatest pioneers in science did not accept any such exclusion of transcendence. For example, the inventors of the Big Bang theory and the theory of genetics were both Catholic clergy (Lemaître and Mendel), and the first woman to be a professor of mathematics was a devout Catholic laywoman, Maria Agnesi, appointed to her position by Pope Benedict XIV in 1750. At least part of my work in the science and religion debate is to respond to the negative school, to show alternative academic perspectives.

The transcendent is also an issue in a more positive sense, namely that science can be of great help in thinking about transcendent matters. This assistance is certainly true in the case of Christian theology. In 325 AD, the Catholic Church declared formally that God the Father and Jesus Christ are “one substance”. That word used, *homoousious*, does not come from scripture but from Greek philosophy, inspired especially by Aristotle’s invention of biology and the unity of a living being as one “substance” (*ousious*). In the twenty-first century, in my own research, I have found connections between the descriptions by St Thomas Aquinas of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit and contemporary work in experimental psychology, especially in shared attention and autistic spectrum disorder. As a result, I have a new metaphor for what Christians call the life of grace, namely a life in which our spiritual autism to God is removed, enabling second-person relationship between God and ourselves. Hence advances in science can be of great help in forming concepts of transcendence.

Q5: In practical terms, what do you suggest in order to promote a life perspective that includes the transcendent?

The ancient Greeks knew the answer to this question, which can be found in a famous parable by Plato called the *Myth of the Cave*. In this story, Plato imagines that we are born as prisoners in a cave, compelled to watch nothing except the shadows of puppets of real things. That scenario might seem strange but when I visited Hollywood several years' ago and sat on a film set (of the famous series *Friends*), I realised I was in Plato's cave, one of the places in which our society produces the shadows of the puppets of real things.

For Plato, to attain wisdom and grasp the transcendent we have to get out of the cave. The lesson should be clear. In Brazil, as in many other places, life is increasingly dominated by the screens of televisions, computers, and smart phones, in which we see only the shadows of the puppets of real things. From time to time, we need to switch off these screens, along with all other noises and distractions, and allow ourselves to be touched by transcendence.

On this last point, I want to mention a Latin American hero, José Moreno Hernández, who is from the United States and has Mexican background. He wanted to become an astronaut his whole life since the age of twelve, and after a great deal of work he was accepted into NASA and flew on the penultimate mission of the space shuttle. I had the opportunity to meet him in Mexico in 2016 and I asked him how his journey into space had influenced him spiritually. He said he left Earth with an indifferent religious faith. Nevertheless, when he saw the glory of the stars, beyond the atmosphere, he was struck with the conviction that there has to be a Creator God. His extraordinary story reinforces my conclusion that, if we escape from Plato's cave one way or another, we can certainly still encounter the transcendent.

Our interview with Dr Hernandez can be found here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uji7wbFMzjY>

Andrew Pinsent: Formerly a particle physicist on the DELPHI experiment at CERN, Dr Pinsent has degrees in philosophy and theology and a second doctorate in philosophy. A major theme of his research is second-person (I-you) relatedness in science, philosophy, and theology. His publications include work in virtue ethics, neurotheology, science and religion, the philosophy of the person, insight, divine action, and the nature of evil. <https://www.ianramseycentre.info/andrew-pinsent>