

Luc Ferry's Possibility of Atheistic Salvation

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Received 2021-08-30; accepted 2024-10-11; published Online First 2024-12-10.

Abstract

If one embraces spiritual development as a kind of cognitive and moral development, then an important term here from a cognitive perspective and beyond might be “salvation.” But is it not reserved for the religious sphere? This article shows that it doesn't have to be. A new form of salvation suggested by Francophone philosopher Luc Ferry concerns first of all the resignation from a faith about a transcendent God, which is substituted with an undefined sacrum (what is holy, is highest) in immanence. New form of ethic is becoming a popular alternative to religious spirituality today. However, traditional and new spirituality should not be treated as separate sets, as they do not necessarily compete with each other. Systems of spiritual development related to specific denominations will always provide inspiration even for atheist's ethic. The latter can indicate that apart from religion, there is also a spirituality that can develop in a person. Nihilism is not the only alternative to religion, as sometimes the defenders of the old religious order try to show.

Keywords: Luc Ferry, French philosophy of religion, new atheism, salvation, new spirituality.

The concept of salvation may seem to be an interesting concept from the perspective of secular, even naturalistic, reflection, if one considers its connection with epistemic, cognitive, as well as moral and social dimensions. However, a research problem arises: the theme of salvation is known from a religious context, which would consequently limit the scope of analysis. Salvation is a notion that is inseparably connected with religions. Every religion offers salvation, although it is understood in various ways: as a gift won by Christ in Chris-

tianity, human self-discipline that leads to the state of nirvana as in Buddhism, a cycle of rebirth heading towards a different reality as in Hinduism. The very state of salvation is understood differently depending on religion: as a gift of gods or God, reincarnation aiming at a perfect state, intensification of the actual state (as Islam proposes), or, lastly, dissolution of the “self” in the state of Buddhist nirvana.

However, every religious system, and for some the lasting power of religion lies in this, offers a passage to a different reality, the reality that is better, more miraculous, distinct from the world in which we now live. The notion of religious salvation includes two essential elements: the existence of a different reality and a possibility of a man living in it—for every human being carries in himself a desire to live. Death is the element that man would like to eliminate. Religious systems, for those who believe, correctly, for those who do not believe, deceivingly, offer salvation—an extraordinary passage from this life to another.

The notion of salvation was not limited to religion. It suffices to mention the interpretations connected to Plato’s *Phaedo* and the whole current of neo-platonic tradition. Plato did not only justify the immortality of the soul by reference to its simplicity, but he [also] emphasizes the necessity of the relativization of death. Death is no longer something ultimate; there exists a possibility of its overcoming. Another proposal came from the Stoics. According to them, death is a part of the natural order and one should not be afraid of it. As long as death is inscribed in nature, it cannot be evil. Andre Manaranche, the author of a monograph about the concept of salvation, remarks that in the modern era salvation started to be “moralized” by means of identifying it with the conduct of ethical life, which itself became independent from religious practices. He enumerates three thinkers responsible for this process: Kant, Jacobi, and Schleiermacher (Manaranche, 1969).

L. Dupré, analyzing the notion of salvation, points out that it consists in satisfying a human desire for overcoming all anxiety and fear, a task unfulfillable in normal life, according to him salvation always has a sacral dimension (Dupré, 1972, p. 20). In the reality that surrounds us, we will never find salvation—we can only strive to achieve it. The appearance of the notion of “earthly salvation” is connected with Hegel’s philosophy, and later with Marks’s and Engels’s. Hegel identified the idea of salvation with progress, although he still linked it with the Absolute Spirit. Only left-wing inheritors of Hegel’s legacy stated that the idea of God hinders progress and delays salvation. The concept of salvation, although still essentially connected with religious systems, was, however, appearing also in the secular contexts.

Do atheistic currents, in particular, more and more popular atheistic spirituality, proposed by French thinkers like André Comte-Sponville and Luc Ferry negate the concept of salvation? Or maybe there exists atheistic salvation? What is its nature? Does it refer to religious systems?

All contemporary atheists assume that there is no transcendence in a sense of another world, which goes beyond the natural order. This claim is being supported, on the one hand, by reference to modern science and naturalistic methodology (like in Dawkins or Harris), and, on the other hand, by philosophical arguments (like in Comte-Sponville and M. Onfray). This is why neither religious nor philosophical interpretations of the afterlife feature in contemporary literature (Onfray, 2013).

Naturally, it is a different, yet religious, issue to ask if atheists themselves can be redeemed, but, e.g. in Christianity, the question has been positively resolved by the Second Vatican Council. The prevailing view has it that it is impossible to talk about atheistic spirituality let alone about atheistic salvation. This view usually steams from an often unreflectively accepted conviction that atheism is inseparably tied to materialism, and if there is no “other” reality, there is also no salvation. In this paper, I want to present the thought of a contemporary French philosopher Luc Ferry, who, while admitting his atheism, at the same time heavily critiques materialism and also proposes the concept of transcendence enclosed in immanence which can be described as “atheistic salvation”.

Luc Ferry starts his book *A Brief History of Thought. A Philosophical Guide To Living* by asking what is philosophy. However, he quickly concludes that the answer to this question is not to be expected, being as many answers as philosophers, and therefore passes to the reflection about finitude “that the human being, as distinct from God, is mortal or, to speak like the philosophers, is a ‘finite being’, limited in space and time. As distinct from animals, moreover, a human being is the only creature who is aware of his limits. He knows that he will die, and that his near ones, those he loves, will also die. Consequently he cannot prevent himself from thinking about this state of affairs, which is disturbing and absurd, almost unimaginable. And, naturally enough, he is inclined to turn first of all to those religions which promise ‘salvation’” (Ferry, 2011, e-book chapter 1).

Interestingly, according to Ferry, in defining philosophy precisely the word “salvation” is crucial. Ferry points out that death is not limited merely to the biological end of life but “we encounter an infinite number of its variations, in the midst of life, and these many faces of death trouble us, even if we are not always aware of them. To live well, therefore, to live freely, capable of joy, generosity and love, we must first and foremost conquer our fear—or, more accurately, our fears of the irreversible. But here, precisely, is where religion and philosophy pull apart” (Ferry, 2011, e-book chapter 1). If there are many kinds of death, not only the biological one, are there also many kinds of salvation?

However, the starting point is marked by the divergence between philosophy and religion, and, consequently, by a different understanding of salvation. Religions save only by truths they proclaim, and the most secure way to salvation is humility. Salvation requires an acceptance of the truth of a religious system and life that accords with these truth. This constitutes an entirely different vision of salvation than one proposed by philosophy because philosophy “also claims to save us—if not from death itself, then from the anxiety it causes, and to do so by the exercise of our own resources and our innate faculty of reason. Which, from a religious perspective, sums up philosophical pride: the effrontery evident already in the earliest philosophers, from Greek antiquity, several centuries before Christ. (...) If religions can be defined as ‘doctrines of salvation’, the great philosophies can also be defined as doctrines of salvation (but without the help of a God)” (Ferry, 2011, e-book chapter 1).

Ferry gives two reasons for his rejection of the religious notion of salvation. Firstly, a vision of the almighty and infinitely benevolent God is “too good to be true”. Historical events like genocides in Auschwitz, Ruanda, or Cambodia contradict it. Secondly, religion alleviates the fear of death by changing it into an illusion, but at the cost of freedom of thinking. “For it demands, more or less, that we abandon reason and the enquiring spirit in return for faith and serenity. It asks that we conduct ourselves, before God, like little children, not as curious adults” (Ferry, 2011, e-book chapter 1).

Philosophical salvation starts with the consciousness of one’s mortality, in the biological sense as well as in the sense of the termination of our actions, transiency, irreversibility—in one word, with the consciousness of our “deplorable” existential condition. A philosopher, says Ferry, “is principally not someone who believes that we are here as ‘tourists’, to amuse ourselves. Even if he does come to believe that amusement alone is worth experiencing, it will at least be the result of a process of thought, a reflection rather than a reflex” (Ferry, 2011, e-book chapter 1). In the wake of the rejection of the cosmological order of the ancients and of the medieval God-given order, the notion of salvation loses its main reference-points “the idea of salvation would seem virtually unthinkable” (Ferry, 2011, e-book chapter 4).

Ferry claims that the new—philosophical—understanding of salvation is, most importantly, connected with the change in the understanding of ethics. He has in mind a distinction between cosmological and naturalistic ethics of the ancient Greeks, and, in consequence, also Christian ethics, and humanistic one, based on freedom, which came to be in the modern world as an effect of the advent of the new anthropology. The first ethical system can be nicely illustrated by a reference to Aristotle. The essence of ethics was virtue understood as a form of perfection, as the most perfect realization of what constitutes human nature. The human being was supposed to realize what is inscribed in his nature, and, in the case of Christianity, what is prescribed by God. Modernity changed it entirely, now it is a man who, thanks to his freedom, discovers and

determines what is his task and purpose. Earlier it was nature or God that set purpose to man and direction to ethics, which also facilitated the acceptance of the religious notion of salvation. If a man did not achieve his goal (because here on earth it is impossible), he still could do it “thanks to” and “in” Transcendence understood as “other world”.

In modern times man becomes free, he is neither a “prisoner” of deterministic nature nor of Transcendent God, but he becomes a moral subject thanks to his freedom of telling apart good from evil. Obviously, Ferry does not think that modern freedom condones arbitrariness in establishing laws, quite the contrary, according to him modern ethics refers to two important notions: selflessness and universality. The first is about the lack of profit from a performed action, and the second focuses on the common good, which is elevated above the good of the individual. These two pillars of modern ethics ultimately make possible what Ferry calls transcendence in immanence, and ultimately allow to talk about “philosophical salvation”.

In the introduction to the book *Man Made God: The Meaning of Life* Ferry again poses the question of death. Is it true that only religions can provide here consolation and that today we are doomed to psychotherapists with their pills? Can a modern man still pose questions about the meaning of life in the context of the rejection of the afterlife and religious salvation? Under the influence of the new ethics (without reference to God or nature) people ceased to perceive their lives in eschatological categories. The remedy is a constant searching for new goals. One goal gives way to another, we permanently strive for something. The unceasing projecting and goal-setting dominate our world, but what this undertakings lack is precisely the “meaning of meaning” (Ferry, 2002, p. 7). The remedy for the crises of the senses is transcendence in immanence.

Even though western civilization becomes more and more atheistic and agnostic, it still holds that there is something more important than the life of an individual. Even atheists, who refer precisely to selflessness and universality, can name values that are more important than their own lives “Here again it is a question of a kind of transcendence, but no longer that of a God who imposes himself on us from the outside. In is not even that of formal values, which already appear to us in some enigmatic way to surpass egoistic immanence, but rather of a transcendence that is situated beyond good and evil because it belongs to the order of meaning and not to that of mere respect for the law” (p. 21). In effect Ferry suggests that the modern man does not resign from all depth in his life, his morality. Moreover, precisely selflessness “gives us access for the first time in history to a genuine spirituality, freed of its faded theological trappings and rooted in human beings. (...) The fundamental values of modern thinkers, whatever one may say here or there, are in truth not original—or really very ‘modern’. What is new is that they are thought through starting from human beings, not deduced from a revelation that precedes and encompasses them. What is new, without a doubt, is that the indefinable transcendence they

carry itself bears witness to the very core of humanity's being and that it can therefore agree with the principle of principles constituting modern humanism: the one that rejects arguments from authority" (p. 21-22).

Ferry describes two processes that we witness. On the one hand, we deal with the humanization of the godly, and on the other with the process of divinization of the human. The humanization of the divine amounts to nothing other than the negation of Transcendence which squares well with the modern critique of all metaphysics and with the reduction of religious understanding to the purely human aspect. Religion is not related to the personal God but functions only as an optional space for self-development. There still are people who accept the existence of the reality which goes beyond that order, but more and more often "they are abandoning traditional dogma in favor of conversion to the ideology of human rights" (p.33). Obviously—one can simply look at how selectively religious practitioners treat commands and prohibitions of the Church in the realm of morality. Ferry states that the proposal of the primacy of truth, that is, the primacy of moral truth over freedom, like one included in John Paul the Second's *Veritatis Splendor*, cannot be accepted by a modern man. Moral problems are no longer debated from the theological but only from the general human perspective. The humanization of the divine, that is, the reduction of a religious dimension to the merely horizontal perspective means, however, a total break with the essence of religion. Ferry proposes an exchange of the religious spirituality, which, as he claims, no longer refers to the personal God, for the "new spirituality", identical with the sanctification of man. For today we do not face the growth of nihilism or godlessness, as representants of traditional religions (especially Christians) claim, but with the authentic return to ethics and traditional values. According to Ferry, the fundamental characteristics of the "new spirituality" are provided by the concept of holiness, but specifically defined, entirely different than in religious narratives. Holiness ultimately boils down to emphasizing the sacral character of human dignity. Human dignity is in fact the only value for which people are ready to sacrifice their lives. Because a man today is not inclined to sacrifice his life for the sake of the state, God, or ideology. Only another human being, loved by us, can liberate in us the readiness for sacrifice, selflessness, including a possibility of laying down our life for him. This is 'sacralization of humanity' which presupposes a transition from what could be called "vertical transcendence" (e.g., God) to "horizontal transcendence" (the transcendence of other people towards myself).

Another human being becomes the main landmark for ethical relations and he discloses the transcendence in immanence. Ferry principally disagrees with all attempts to provide a secular justification for human dignity, but he sees in it an element that cannot be reduced to the purely biological dimension. Sacrifice for others, for those who are close to us, for humanity, bears a mark of transcendence and endows our life with meaning. In this sense, there are actions that,

paradoxically, oppose death by leading to it. The act of scarfing a life, without the hope for another, better one, is exactly a sign of salvation (self-salvation).

The idea of transcendence in immanence was heavily critiqued by Gauchet. His joint publication with Ferry *Le Religieux après la religion* (Ferry and Gauchet, 2003) presents their debate in which the interlocutors attempt to specify their positions concerning religion. Ferry repeats his thesis that traditional religion, which refers to the personal God, and which tries to fashion moral laws and build a society on the divine fundament, is shrinking. The critique of the “personal” transcendence does not mean that there is no one who engages in traditional religious practices or believes, but in Ferry’s view it still boils down to individualized perspectives of concrete people. Gauchet concurs with this diagnosis, but the differences between them show themselves in conclusions they draw from the description of the prevailing religiosity. Ferry attempts to justify a claim that the “humanization of the divine” and “sanctification of man” (processes described above) lead to a gradual disclosure of the transcendence in immanence. Transcendence becomes an ethical horizon (selflessness, readiness for laying down one’s life out of love) which is to change our life from the “life of purposes” to the “life of sense”. This is precisely such a life that is identified with the salvific process. This higher sense saves us, that is, it redeems us from a meaningless life. Gauchet challenges Ferry by claiming that every appearance of transcendence, even understood as a “sense of senses”, should be rejected, if one wants to be consistently atheistic.

Interestingly, Ferry negatively refers to the conception of the (future) salvation of man through science, proposed by the supporters of transhumanism (Ferry, 2016, ebook chapter 1). Does it not trigger salvific hope that humanity as a whole in the coming future will be altered by the new technologies to the point where our cognitive and biological capacities will be amplified so much so that the death itself will cease? Ferry doubts the possibility of overcoming death through science because ultimately the whole universe too will undergo destruction. Science can postpone death, but it cannot prevail over it. Ferry also confronts transhumanists with the fundamental question: is transhumanism an ideological heir to the Enlightenment (human rights, democratic ideas, etc.) or is it a radical “post-humanism” that envisages the advent of the new species of man? (Ferry, 2016, ebook chapter 1). He answers that on the one hand, we deal with traditional humanism which emphasizes human dependence on biological factors, yet, on the other hand, a human being attempts—in the name of freedom—to modify his biological nature—and this is a mark of the new humanism. Instead of biological modification of our essence and artificial prolongation of life, Ferry proposes endowing it with sense by performing deeds of love. Even the longest life, when it is deprived of sense, cannot be deemed fully human. Obviously, science matters, but it cannot be a decisive factor in man’s salvation.

It is no longer the transcendence of God, who controls them from outside, it is not even the transcendence of the formal values which—as it seemed—in a puzzling way infringes upon the egoistic immanence of the Self, but it is a transcendence constituted beyond good and evil because it belongs to the order of sense rather than to the rigid moral rules.

Ultimately, according to Ferry, salvation turns into the transcendence of freedom, which not only exists within us, but also outside of us. We don't invent the values. They exist independently of us. Salvation proposed by Ferry is identified with going beyond oneself, through gestures of love, sacrifice, faithfulness, trust—this is in what transcendence in immanence consists. But will it prove sufficient in the face of the loss of our close ones that we love? Is leaving some trace of goodness in others the only way to “save” oneself? Will the memory of our deeds full of sacrifice be enough? Do we not desire personal endurance in some other reality? These questions still remain unanswered in the search for salvation in atheistic spirituality. Granted, the searching for meaning and the reference to values that transcend our individual existence are positive elements of atheistic spirituality, but, surely, it is not a kind of salvation that is expected by man in confrontation with the mystery of death.

In stressing the call of freedom as a condition of salvation, L. Ferry's proposal refers to the French tradition of atheistic existentialism, especially Sartre's. Firstly, L. Ferry does not engage himself in negating the Absolute, as Sartre does. For the former author, atheism constitutes a presupposition of human beings' functioning in a secularized society. No argument in favor of it is needed as it is a default state. Western civilization operates without a necessity of religious grounding and so it does not betray a need for the justification of atheism. For this reason, its atheism is not as radical and aggressive as the Anglo-Saxon one. Secondly, freedom in Ferry's work is not as “absolute” as in Sartre. It is “relativized” in light of values like love; it is not an end in itself.

Ferry frequently emphasizes in his works that modernity in many ways is an heir to Christianity—for example, the Declaration of the Rights of Man is nothing other than a secularized version of Christianity. Human dignity is still there but no longer need any transcendent justification. Similarly, is atheistic salvation also only a secularized form of Christianity? Because the essence of salvation, according to the French philosopher, is simply love. But is not love the key to Christian salvation too? The relationship between God and man is based on love: God initially loves man and man responds with love. So is it not the case that atheists come to the justification of the same idea to which also Christians adhere, while, obviously, rejecting the concept of Transcendent Love? As Dupré notes, even in ancient religious traditions, the concept of salvation does not only mean eternal life, but also the very path towards heaven. For Christians, the path to salvation is nothing more than the practice of love (Dupré, 1972, p. 354). According to Dupré, this conception is specifically Christian, because most of the religious systems steam from fear. Granted, the call for love appears

in most religions, but still, the major part of the adherents of different religions would deem the term “love” inappropriate for describing their relationship with God. The absolute identification seems to be a typically Christian phenomenon. In Christianity, the thesis that God is love is a point of departure, but in Ferry salvation boils down to the thesis that love becomes divine and saves a human being. But one can challenge Ferry on another point. Is his proposal of atheistic salvation—paradoxically—not amounting to the acceptance of Christian praxis without religious truths? Here some affinities with S. Weil can be detected. True salvation does not occur due to being a part of some religious denomination, but as a result of the relationship in which persons stand with respect to earthly things. Everyone who practices the love of their neighbour and accepts life together with the suffering it entails, even if they live and die as “atheists”, is surely saved. However, as Weil insists, human will alone cannot lead to salvation. Accordingly, the notion of secular morality is unacceptable. This certainly sets her apart from L. Ferry’s thought.

In turn, an interpretation close to Ferry, who ultimately identifies salvation with practical Christianity without the Absolute, came from a Polish thinker P. Augustyniak. In his work “Jezus—Niechrystus” (*Jesus—Non-Christ*) (Augustyniak, 2021) Jesus was not God and Christianity became “created” by St. Paul. But Jesus’s attitude, his life, his call to the moral purification of the self as well as to set new relationships with the outside world are worthy of imitation and even necessary for human fruition (i.e., salvation). In Poland also H. Elzenberg can be mentioned as a precursor of the atheistic spirituality or non-religious salvation (in contrast, works by T. Kotarbiński and M. Przyłęcki propose rather independent ethics while for Ferry ethics is to be separated from spirituality and hence also from salvation). On the one hand, Elzenberg proposes “religionless mysticism” in the spirit of A. Comte-Sponville, for whom mysticism includes silence, mystery, fruition, simplicity, unity, the experience of eternity, and unconditional acceptance. Elzenberg’s mysticism of values, which origins can be identified in Buddhism, becomes a condition allowing for the achievement of the “state of salvation”. On the other hand, an affinity can be detected between Elzenberg and Ferry, because the latter claimed that the experience of transcendence takes place within the immanence, especially as an encounter with values (Pałubicki, 2015).

Another question that comes up is whether the notion of transcendence in immanence cannot also serve as a category for analysing contemporary believers. Luc Ferry stops, he does not want to move forward and ask whether the transcendence found in the subject (by this very subject) can have something in common with the Divine Transcendence. This is not surprising, on the one side, at the beginning of the text I presented motifs that were decisive in the rejection of God by Ferry, but the most important thing is that it would amount to overstepping the competence of the philosopher. This is why the question has to

remain open here. However, Ferry's attempt to disclose the necessity of (secular) spirituality as an element of human life is purely intellectual in nature. It can, and even should, exert a concrete influence on the quality of social life.

Funding

The article was prepared within the research project "Francuska duchowość ateistyczna" ["French atheist spirituality"], *Preludium* No. 2017/25/N/HS1/00353, financed by Narodowe Centrum Nauki (NCN) [National Science Centre, Poland].

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