

Rainer Bruno Zimmer

The Absolute

1. What the Subject Is, and How It Can Be Talked About.

"Absolute" means "detached" or "separate" – just as the Latin adjective "absolutus". If the word "absolute" is standing alone, this detachedness or separateness is understood to be total, that is "absolute" as the opposite of "relative" or of "in relation", and, by the way, not as a superlative. The Absolute is not detached from, or separate of, something – because that would still be a relation to this "something" –, but it is detached from, and separate of, everything and cannot be put in any relation.

This requires some special care in communicating about the Absolute. Because assertions are always about relations, it is impossible to make assertions about the Absolute. Of course, this consequence applies to the full content of this very essay on the Absolute. As this essay is meant to be relevant, we have to show first, that and how its statements could be valid in some way.

Above all, nothing can be said about whether the Absolute is somehow "being" at all. This does not exclude that we humans may be able to perceive something as absolute, as different from all – relative – contents of our world.

If we want to communicate such a perception then, as said before, assertions are ineligible, and therefore it is getting difficult. Still, we have our vocabulary and can try to use it for talking "around" the perception or to otherwise induce associations and thereby approximately "point to" the perceived Absolute. And, by any chance, the addressee of the communication may start to "see" it – not optically, but with the "inner eye".

Approximately pointing language can indeed be effective, as the preceding sentence may already demonstrate. Most people readily "understand" what is meant with the "inner eye", even though nowhere inside the human body there is an eye in the literal sense of the word. And so we can hope that this whole essay can be effective as an approximately pointing text; that it can successfully point.

2. Why We Should Actually Concern Ourselves With the Absolute

To begin with, we offer only one example here, more will follow below.

Without the Absolute there is no salvation [in German: *Erlösung*]. This is almost a tautology: Salvation is detachment from strain, here in the existential meaning: detachment from the fundamental burden of our existence, that is the strain to meet the incessant demands of our being in the world. As the Absolute [in German: *das Abgelöste*] is literally detached from everything, it is also detached from the world. It offers the only possible "position" towards which one may possibly detach oneself from the world – in which one may be saved [*erlöst*].

This should be sufficient reason to deal with the Absolute.

There are two ways for this: We can directly have an absolute experience, or we can focus on our being and try to "see" what of our being is absolute – in other words: any aspects of our being, apart from the world. (For the totality of these aspects we use the term "Dasein" below.)

3. Experiences of the Absolute

In view of all that we have so far said about the Absolute, we cannot have any control about whether, if, and how we may possibly experience it. But if we do experience it, it must in any case come as absolute, unmistakable, compelling, ungraspable, indescribable. The noteworthiness of the experience will urge us to tell it to other people, but we will have no better than more or less inapplicable words about the situation in which it happened, mainly the inner images und feelings directly after it.

Experiences of the Absolute have been reported at all times: facing God; mystical unification with God, nature, or nothingness; a deep stage of meditation; standstill of time; a burning bush that is not consumed by the fire; the sun crashing down. Such reports fit the pattern above, but the reference to an experience of the Absolute cannot be proved, not even stated as an assertion. Whoever has not personally had such an experience, will tend to view it as impossible; and whoever did have an absolute experience of his or her own, will say: in my case, it was different. Experiences of the Absolute may happen to everybody, but they can hardly be objectified.

4. What of Our Being Is Absolute – the Pursuit of the Primordial

The second way to deal with the Absolute, is to focus on our being and to look whether we can see something absolute in it. Phenomena in the world are out of the question –

that is, all perceptions from the senses, thoughts, feelings, motivations, memories, inner images, inner words – because everything in the world is relative and conceivable, so that it can also be said: The Absolute is the Extra-worldly.

Below, we offer a number of candidates for sights of the Absolute.

Note well: This is not a matter of assertions that might be true or false, that could be proved or refuted, for or against which one could argue. Rather the offered sights are either suitable, or not: either one can see what is shown, or one cannot.

Absolute: That There Is Something, and That We Are Being; the Authentic Self

What we are certain about is, above all, our existence. There is not just nothing, but there is something. Everybody knows this for himself with absolute certainty, because it occurs to himself.

This is a given that does not lend itself to inner-worldly critique, for example, to the argument that it were an illusion, quite possibly produced by our brain. In order to build a structure of concepts – my world – and to move therein, for example, to understand and speak of illusions and brain capabilities, there must first and primordially be a framework enabling that something articulated and *conceptually graspable* can occur to me. To this end, I have to be, and to me something has to stand out from nothingness – *to exist* – that I understand.

Therefore, we can say: it is absolute, that there is something and that it refers to myself.

This "self" does not occur to us but we know that we are "it". To discriminate it from other meanings of the word "self", we speak here of the Absolute or Authentic Self.

Absolute: That We Understand

What occurs to us primordially is changing phenomena. Above all, they are always understood. We understand them directly and in such a way, that we "can live them".

Our individual world consists of those phenomena that we understand whenever they occur to us. *The* world is everything that humans can and could in principle understand.

In order not to leave this as abstract as it appears, we should enrich it with some context:

Our understanding is conceptual and corresponds directly to our concepts. Primarily, the phenomena are complete situations, possibly with some characteristic highlights. The situations can be unstructured, for example, we perceive them merely as comfortable or uncanny. But if we have already encountered them repeatedly, then we can structure them conceptually and understand their details and relationships.

For everybody, individually, the phenomena and the corresponding concepts are the same. The discrimination between phenomena and concepts is not existentially

primordial, but an additional analysis. Let us, for example, take a certain piece of text: Depending on the individual understanding of the person encountering the text, it will occur to him as unintelligible text, as unintelligible German text, as understood but otherwise unknown German text, or perhaps as a German text of a Beatles song, that he may even be able to sing. Only from the communication with Others we see that everybody has conceptually different phenomena, and that the individual worlds therefore differ. And only by communication can we match worlds among each other, and copy world contents from each other, and thus establish a common, objective world.

Back to the primordial understanding. It is not the same as being able to explain. If our television set abruptly ceases to display any picture anymore, or when, out of nothing, we see everything laterally inversed, or if somebody is suddenly healed from an objectively incurable disease, then we may not be able to explain it, but we do precisely understand the direct facts; otherwise, they could not irritate us.

We understand everything that occurs to us in the world. Our understanding is absolute.

Absolute: Our Intelligence, the Steady Momentary Growth of Our World

From one moment to the other, we understand something new that we did not understand before, and of which we did not even know that there was something to understand. We are not in control of this. New understanding is a given that we do not understand in that it is not completely predictable, but ceaseless as long as we live.

The following analyzes, so to speak, microscopically, how our life is proceeding:

We are, at the moment, in a situation that we understand. We know that the next moment comes. We understand from our previous experience, how we can, through our behaviour, influence the situation in the next moment. By choosing from this behavioural repertoire, we take the step to the next moment. It comes, and the situation is as we have intended, or it differs. Maybe, we ponder why it has turned out this or the other way, and learn our lesson from it, such that our understanding of situations and behaviour is confirmed or changed.

All that is certain and inescapable, it is absolute: the current moment; the inevitably coming next moment; the past moments; our contribution to the coming moment through our will; the disposability of the past for competent willing; the growth of our understanding that results from the step to the current moment.

Like our understanding, the steady growth of our understanding – the steady growth of our world – is an absolute given of our being.

Absolute: Our Free Will

Every moment, corresponding to our will, we choose from our repertoire of understanding behaviour, the step to the next moment.

Our choice depends on our view of how the world is functioning. If we feel restricted in our freedom in the world, then this is not a matter of our free will, but of our possible choices, as it were, our degrees of freedom. They, in turn, depend upon our own knowledge and capabilities, and upon many inner-worldly factors, from our own drives and inhibitions unto the impositions by other people. In our world, we are bound to the learnt laws and rules, to causality and chance, and therefore, scientifically, there cannot be a free will.

To will freely, we can only if absolved from all inner-worldly laws and rules, that is being detached from the world. It follows, that the only position, from which one can freely will, is the absolute position of the Authentic Self.

It is therefore impossible to make any assertions about a free will, neither about where it might come from, nor how it could have an effect in the world. However, we know by ourselves, that it is effective: that we can freely intend something of our choice and, depending on our possibilities, pursue and attain the intended.

Absolute: The Signification of Our Being

We have noted above, that our world is growing in small steps as we continue to understand more and more. In a greater perspective, this is even more obvious: We all did not understand anything, initially in our life. Then we made our own experiences and learnt from others, and today, our understanding and our capabilities are so voluminous, that a human lifetime would not be enough for documenting all of them. This is true for everybody individually as for all mankind. From zero world to a very large world: this shows, that our being is essentially disposed in such a way, that we advance our possibilities of life. This is absolutely so.

Accordingly, the signification of our life is, to advance life. In other words: to advance life is *good*, not to advance life is *bad*; the mindset not to advance life is *evil*.

5. Related Considerations

Forgiveness

We always have many chances for advancing life. Taking the ones we miss the others. With those that we are taking, we are in line with the fundamental disposition of our being: to advance life. With those that we are missing, we are not in line, we come out guilty, owing something to our being.

Guilt is therefore a fundamental trait of our being. For advancing life, it is productive to learn from guilt how to possibly advance life better in the future. Counterproductive is to otherwise deal with guilt, to wallow in it, to maintain a fixation on it, to allow oneself to be absorbed by it. Above all, we have to overcompensate impairments to life possibilities that we have done to others, to at least advance life in the overall balance.

If other people impair our life, then this does not offset the fundamental disposition of our being. We must not contribute further impairments by returning like for like, or by taking revenge. It may be tough, but from the guilt of others we have to learn how to advance life better, and, apart from that, we have to bear the corresponding burden on us.

From all this, the following is evident: Whichever kind of accounting of guilt and condemnation on the base of guilt may be thought of: they are not reconcilable with advancing life. If the question of forgiveness can be raised at all, then: our guilt is forgiven.

The Attractive World

We have found ourselves in the world without any contribution on our part, we have been "put" or "thrown" into it. And we engage in it, we even fall for it, lose ourselves in it. What we thereby actually lose, and have already lost, is our sight of the Absolute. We may never have had a sight of it, and it did not occur to us at all, that we could get a sight of it. But even when we get the opportunity for it, we tend to avoid it – like everything that has to do with questions about our existence. Our being has, so to speak, a downward slope into the world and away from the Absolute, and this slope is fairly steep.

We fully engage in the world, in order to participate in the advancement of life there, and in doing so, we ignore the Absolute. Without help, we will not get a sight of it, and we do not know anyway what that should be good for. We have no bearing on it.

Still, many people believe they know, what it is good for, say, to pray the Our Father. We want to follow this up now and demonstrate that, what has been said before, coincides with the existential content of the Our Father, in other words that we have just had a walk through the Our Father.

6. The Absolute in the Our Father

That the Our Father has an existential meaning is fairly obvious. Whenever the authors of the bible want to say something essential about our Dasein, they tend to present it as God's words, or as Jesus' words, as they use to ascribe divine authority to him and his words. Accordingly, Jesus' words are predominantly Dasein descriptions, above all the parables and the Sermon on the Mount, and therein, the Our Father.

However, the Our Father consists mostly of petitions, and petitions are not the same as descriptions. But the author of the Gospel according to Matthew has Jesus explain, a few verses earlier, that God knows and gives us what we need before we pray for it. Therefore it is perfectly legitimate to read the petitions of the Our Father as God-givens, that is, as statements about the Absolute. This is what we are going to do now, and in doing so, we will recognize exactly that, which we have laid out above.

Our Father which art in heaven shows this from the very beginning, as heaven stands for the Extra-worldly, the Absolute. God in heaven is thereby declared as absolute. The aspect of fatherliness will be covered below.

Holy is thy name repeats the Second Commandment and means that God's name is holy or sacrosanct – untouchable – insofar as it is impossible to relate it and form assertions about it.

Thy kingdom is coming refers to two major aspects of a "kingdom": governance and richness, which can be taken as the headlines of the two subsequent petitions.

Thy will is being done in earth, as it is in heaven points to two God-givens: What happens "in heaven", that is: extra-worldly, is rather invisible to us. Still, we have recognized our free will as absolute – in old language: as "heavenly" or "divine". "In earth" can confidently be understood as "in the world". We have shown above what "comes" towards us in the world: steadily and unavoidably, phenomena are occurring to us, and we understand them as the contents of our world. But which phenomena actually occur to us, is beyond our control. They occur to us fate-like, as if willed by some extra-worldly, absolute entity: as if willed and given by God.

You give us, all the time, what we need to live is the deeper meaning of the petition for our daily bread, if we take into account Jesus' answer to the devil's first temptation. Accordingly, man does not live by bread alone, but "by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God". Here they are again, the phenomena that occur to us from moment to moment: "spoken" by God, that is, absolute and articulated, so that we directly understand them, and they constitute our being-in-the-world, our life. This world is utterly rich and for free, a present.

You forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors says, in its first part, the same as our first "related consideration" above: that our guilt is absolutely forgiven. The second part says that we must forgive if we want to stay in line with the fundamental disposition of our Dasein, to advance life.

You do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil corresponds to our second "related consideration": it is the world that attracts us, that is, "leads us into temptation", not the Absolute. But already in the beginning of this essay we have seen, that the Absolute can deliver us.

Let us come back to the first line of the Our Father, to the question left open: what about God is "father", or what about the Absolute is fatherly or parental. Some indication is that, compared to our elaborations above, the Our Father text seems to

miss the intrinsic meaning of life, that is: to advance life. As we have seen, the latter is tantamount to the growth of our world, to the increase of what we understand and can act understandingly. It depends primarily upon the phenomena that occur to us, particularly the new ones. Obviously, the new challenges posed to us during, and up to the end of, our life, are such that we can master them and grow with them. This is analogous to the manner in which good parents raise their children: by giving them consistently new, manageable challenges – not sparing them occasional unpleasing ones. Behind the denomination "father" in the Our Father there is exactly this view: that the phenomena occurring to us are, as if devised and measured in such a way that our life is being advanced.

7. Summary

What have we accomplished now? We have taken a look on our being and thus shown that certain traits of it are absolute. The results are far from the common view. The Absolute is so alien to us, that some billions of people can for two Millennia pray the Our Father without the least idea of its existential content. That we could very well live with that, is a view, that ignores our worries.

People are complaining about the badness of the world, after they – themselves – have subdivided it into what suits them and what does not. People complain about the general decline of religiosity, and at the same insist on assertions about God. Scientists have started to presume that the cosmos were all that is, and that it obeyed their laws. A part of mankind lives on cost of the others, unopposed by our ethics of humanity which only confirm the Others' dignity and rights, but ignore the responsibility to advance the life of the Others.

If everybody knew how Dasein is, and what is absolute about it, then these problems could be addressed effectively. But nobody knows it, and the situation is self-stabilizing and would not even change, if somebody would give his life for it and, after death, resurrect to life again.

There remains the benefit for the individual. After all, with knowledge about our Dasein, we can optimize our individual Dasein stance. If we know what is absolute, we can spare the effort to struggle with it. If we know, what is absolutely given, we can consciously accept it and enjoy its richness and beauty. And if we know what is absolute, then we know the meaning of life, which always holds us, even in the deepest loss. To permanently sustain this knowledge and this stance versus the world, is possible. We have to refresh them on a regular basis, by focussing on the Absolute again and again.

* * * * *