

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Spirituality for the Skeptic: The Thoughtful Love of Life*

Robert C. Solomon, New York: Oxford University Press. 2002. 159 pages (ISBN: 0195134672)

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Robert Solomon is the Quincy Lee Centennial Professor of Business and Philosophy and Distinguished Teaching Professor at the University of Austin, and author of more than forty books. Disillusioned with the emotionlessness of current trends in philosophy, put off by both organized religion and new age “platitudes,” he outlines a spirituality based on caring, love, reverence and trust in *Spirituality for the Skeptic*. Invoking Hegel and Nietzsche, Kant and Kierkegaard, Solomon convincingly leads the reader to the concept of a spirituality that transcends the mundane, while remaining deeply embedded in this world. Throughout the book, Solomon builds on the embodied spiritual atheism of Nietzsche, and the all-encompassing spirituality of Hegel.

As an existentialist, Solomon’s naturalistic spirituality, a spirituality that embraces all of life, its comedy and pathos, depends largely on the importance of human passions, individual freedom and personal responsibility. In the beginning of the book we are asked to ponder such questions as:

“How should we live and how should we cope with overwhelming difficulties and tragedies in life? How should we think and deal with death? How can we both respect ourselves and adopt the kind of humility that puts us in our proper place in the world? How can we learn to think of ourselves in terms of our relations with other people, in terms of compassion and shared Spirit, as opposed to our acquisitive individualism? How can we come to terms with the awesome and sometimes terrifying forces in the world without reducing them to economic, political, conspiratorial, or apocalyptic simplicities? How can we cultivate the grand passions and exorcise (or at least limit the damage) of the petty ones? How can we maintain a sense of the big picture while we are so caught up in our hopes, fears, aspirations, and the tempers and fashions of the times?” (p.4)

For Solomon, reverence, trust and love are at the heart of spirituality. Love is the emotion that will lead us to the expanded sense of self that is so much a part of Solomon’s conception of a naturalistic spirituality: as we come to love another person we expand who we are through our relationships with them, we become essentially a “we,” rather than just an “I.” Solomon also discusses the notion of reverence, and in keeping with existentialist thought, he sees reverence as being an act of responsibility, rather than simply a passive sense of awe.

To the concept of love and reverence as key to an expanded sense of self, Solomon adds trust as a way of being in the world, as a way of opening one’s self to the

world. Solomon asserts “trusting changes both the world as trusted and the person who trusts the world.”

Solomon distinguishes between basic trust, which comes from – one hopes - a safe and secure childhood in which one develops a sense of his or her place in the world, and authentic trust which is cultivated rather than being inherited. He describes the expansion of self that may be realized if one is to cultivate an authentic trust and also the reduction of one’s self that comes about if we insist on living our lives in a state of distrust, paranoia, resentment and envy.

Solomon sees the concepts of fatalism, responsibility and freedom as going hand in hand: a philosophical understanding of fatalism can lead us to an experience of cosmic trust and a reverence for a power greater than ourselves. The notion of character is seen as the resolution of the “problem of fate.” Solomon argues that there is a great probability that our adult lives and character will follow what was predicted for us as adolescents. While Solomon does admit to the possibility of contingency and an occasional life-changing transformation, the perspective that he takes is that our lives are predictable based on our earliest character traits.

Solomon sees returning to a philosophical understanding of fate as an impetus to responsibility. Fate is not an excuse to do nothing; rather it is a reason to do what we can with our lives, and to find meaning not only in what we do, but also in the historical context in which we find ourselves.

Seeing our lives as part of a larger narrative, our particular fate woven together with that of our families, our nations and the history of humanity, adds greater meaning to our lives, and leads to a sense of gratitude, not to any particular person or concept, such as God, but simply to the opportunity that we have to live life. As with love, living with a sense of gratitude not only changes us, it changes the world.

This book is a thoughtful search for meaningfulness, and it proves very effective in this regard. Solomon’s own admission of his struggles with envy and resentment, for example, seem to make the author more trustworthy or, at least, more endearing. Solomon makes explicit his belief that there is probably no existence after death, or at least anything that we would recognize as such and while this conception of death may be erroneous the ideal of living a spiritual life now, here on Earth, rather than waiting until we are not, is an important one.

This is an indication of who this book will most appeal to. It is unlikely to be popular with those looking for new-age spirituality, or a reiteration of traditional concepts of spirituality. On the other hand, it will certainly interest those who are looking for a way to live their life thoughtfully and with a spirituality based on love for others, reverence for life and a trust in the world. Whether or not one agrees with all of the assertions made by Solomon in his description of a naturalistic spirituality, it would be difficult, after reading this book, not to take a closer look at one’s own life. *Spirituality*

*for the Skeptic* is a most welcome and useful inspiration for anyone who is interested in “thinking of one’s life itself as an ongoing work of art, and loving it accordingly.”