

Philosophy, Religion, and Spirituality*

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1. *The role of philosophy*

Philosophy has long been a contested subject, and there have been, and still are, many different and often conflicting conceptions of its proper scope and aims. But if we go back to how its founding father, Socrates, conceived of the philosophical enterprise, we find one element which has continued to be central to much if not all subsequent philosophizing, that of *critical scrutiny* or *examination* (in Greek *exetasis*), encapsulated in Socrates' famous pronouncement at his trial, 'the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being'.¹ For Socrates, such 'examination' meant, in the first place, a careful scrutiny of the meaning of our concepts: What do we really mean by justice, or piety, or courage? Can we define these notions?; Do we really understand the criteria for their use? ... and so on. And of course this basic feature of philosophizing remains central today. Philosophers continue to be preoccupied with language, and with the correct analysis of concepts, both in general use and in the specialised disciplines; indeed, for a fair time during the latter part of the twentieth century, it was held that the analysis of language was the *only* proper object of philosophy.²

Yet alongside what may be called this technical or professional concern with meaning and language, philosophers have very often also had a commitment to 'examination' in a deeper sense: they have felt a powerful drive to stand back from our day-to-day preoccupations and concerns and to inquire into the overall direction and purpose of our lives, and the significance of our human existence. This deeper project of examination also has its roots in Socrates, who was patently committed, like many of his successors in the Classical and Hellenistic philosophical worlds, to the search for a life of integrity and virtue. The wording of Socrates' famous pronouncement at his trial should remind us that philosophical 'examination', for Socrates, involved not just a series of abstract conceptual puzzles but a critical scrutiny of the entire character of one's life (*bios*). What is more, as is made clear in the *Apology*, Socrates' philosophical vocation was linked with an unwavering allegiance to the dictates of his conscience, the 'divine sign', as he put it, whose inner voice demanded his obedience.³ Socrates reproaches his Athenian accusers for being very concerned with things like money and reputation, but not having the faintest concern for the improvement of the most precious part of themselves – their souls.⁴ And he goes on to explain that the very activity for which he was famous – engaging his interlocutors in philosophical dialogue – was explicitly designed to 'persuade young and old to make their first and chief concern not for their bodies or their wealth, but for the best possible condition of their souls.'⁵

* The definitive version of this typescript is published in David McPherson (ed.), *Spirituality and the Good Life: Philosophical Approaches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), Ch. 1

¹ ὁ ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ (*ho anexetastos bios ou biōtos anthrōpō*); Plato, *Apology* [c. 390 BC], 38a; translations from Plato are my own.

² Thus Michael Dummett went so far as to declare that with the rise of the modern logical and analytic style of philosophizing 'the proper object of philosophy [has been] finally established, namely ... the analysis of the structure of *thought*, [for which] the only proper method [is] the analysis of *language*.' 'Can Analytic Philosophy Be Systematic?' [1975], in *Truth and Other Enigmas* (London: Duckworth, 1978), p. 458.

³ Plato, *Apology*, 40a2-c2.

⁴ Plato, *Apology*, 29d5-e3; cf. 30a6-b1; 31b; 36c.

⁵ Plato, *Apology*, 30a. For more on this, see John Cottingham, 'Philosophy and Self-improvement: Continuity and Change in Philosophy's Self-conception from the Classical to the Early-modern Era,' in Michael Chase, Stephen Clark and Michael McGhee (ed.), *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Ancients and Moderns* (Oxford: Blackwell 2013), pp. 148-166.

This last aspiration evidently takes us beyond the narrow confines of philosophy construed as a specialised academic discipline and moves us out into the general territory of ‘spirituality and the good life’ which is the subject of the present volume. In thinking about spirituality in this paper, I shall aim to follow the Socratic model in both the ways indicated above. I shall begin at the linguistic or conceptual level, by looking critically at what is meant by the terms ‘spiritual’ and ‘spirituality’, particularly as they figure in our contemporary culture. I shall then move on to ask about the deeper significance for human life of that cluster of experiences and practices that are commonly grouped under the heading of the spiritual. By the end of the paper I shall hope to have thrown some light on the relationship between ‘spiritual’ concerns of the kind that Socrates emphasises, to do with the conduct of life and the ‘care of the self’ (or ‘care of the soul’),⁶ and on the other hand the spiritual concerns that have typically been important to religious believers of the traditional theistic sort. Can one be spiritual without being religious? How far do the two domains overlap? And can there be a valid form of spirituality adapted to the secularist temper of our times? Can one preserve what is important about the Socratic ideal of care of the soul, while subtracting the traditional theistic framework for understanding the spiritual domain which became entrenched in Western thought with the rise of Christianity?

2. What do we mean by ‘spiritual’?

Let us, then, start our ‘examination’ at the linguistic level. A brief perusal of the relevant entry in the Oxford English Dictionary reveals that the term ‘spiritual’ has a wide variety of meanings and uses. In one of the senses listed there, it has a distinctly dualistic flavour, meaning ‘of the nature of a spirit ... incorporeal, immaterial’; and under this heading are cited Milton’s lines, ‘millions of spiritual Creatures walk the Earth/ Unseen ...’⁷ These immaterialist connotations, present in the root noun ‘spirit’, are particularly prominent in the use of the cognate term ‘spiritualism’, which covers activities once popular in the early twentieth century, but now largely discredited, such as attending séances and attempting to communicate with the ghosts of the departed. But in contemporary usage, the terms ‘spiritual’ and ‘spirituality’ are, or can be, entirely free from such ‘spooky’ connotations. The slogan ‘I’m spiritual but I’m not religious’ has become a cliché of our time, and those who employ it normally intend to dissociate themselves from any belief in supernatural entities (as well as from institutionalized religion, which they take to be committed to such entities, or to be objectionable for other reasons).

In this vein, Sam Harris, a prominent spokesman for the ‘new atheism’, has insisted that acknowledging the existence and value of the spiritual is quite consistent with the uncompromisingly empiricist/naturalistic worldview that he champions: ‘spiritual experiences often constitute the most important and transformative moments in a person’s life. Not recognizing that

⁶ For more on the notions of ‘care of the soul’ (*epimeleia tēs psychēs*) and ‘care of the self’ (*epimeleia heautou*) in ancient philosophy, see the magisterial study of Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford Blackwell, 1955), originally published as *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* [1987]. See also Michel Foucault, Seminar at the Collège de France of 6 January 1982, published as ‘Subjectivité et vérité’ [1962] in *Cités*, ed. Y. C. Zarka (Vendôme: Presses Universitaires de France), vol. 2 (March 2000), pp. 143ff; transl. in Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 1-19. Foucault shows how the notion of self-examination and care for the self resonates throughout subsequent Hellenistic thought, in the Epicurean ‘therapeutic’ conception of philosophy, and the Stoic notion of the care of the soul. For the Epicureans, see A. Long and D. N. Sedley (eds), *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 25C; for the Stoics, see for example Seneca, *Epistulae morales* [AD 64], x.

⁷ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* [1667], iv, 677. The context is a speech in which Adam, before the Fall, speaks to Eve of how he is aware of invisible angelic beings all around him, and can hear their ‘celestial voices ... sole, or responsive to each other’s note, singing the Great Creator.’

such experiences are possible or important can make us appear less wise even than our craziest religious opponents.’⁸

In the following two sections we shall look more closely at the nature and significance of the spiritual, including the ‘important’ and ‘transformative’ moments in life which Harris here admits and acknowledges. But keeping for the moment to the question of current linguistic usage, it seems clear that secularists such as Harris are not violating any rules of language in acknowledging the importance of spirituality while repudiating the theistic worldview and dissociating themselves from the beliefs and practices of institutionalized religion. Consider for example the two main components of spirituality, as the term is normally understood today, which I take to be spiritual *praxis*, and spiritual *experience*. As far as the first is concerned, praying to God, and other performances and activities that involve or presuppose the existence of a personal deity (or deities), evidently do not exhaust the class of spiritual practices. One thinks here of the spiritual techniques of fasting, meditation and chanting in the Theravada Buddhist tradition, where there is no belief in a personal God. What is more, we can find a host of techniques and practices on offer in our contemporary culture, concerned for example with goals such as mindfulness, self-awareness, and inner tranquillity,⁹ which are widely regarded as having a ‘spiritual’ aspect, without any suggestion that they are necessarily connected with a religion.

As far as concerns our second main component of spirituality, namely experience, it again appears that contemporary usage allows that an experience can count as spiritual without any suggestion that the content of the experience has to be interpreted in terms of some religious doctrine or doctrines. The kinds of experience cited by Harris in his defence of atheist spirituality involve feelings of ‘selfless wellbeing’, ‘self-transcendence’, and ‘boundless love’,¹⁰ and he maintains that ‘to seek to live a spiritual life without deluding ourselves, we must view these experiences in universal and secular terms’.¹¹ This latter remark, however, raises the stakes, since it evidently goes far beyond the mere claim that one can have spiritual experience without being religious; it is phrased in such a way as to imply that religious accounts of spiritual experience are seriously mistaken, and that Harris’s own preferred secular account is grounded in enlightened (‘universal and secular’) principles that should be acceptable to any rational inquirer. Yet from the fact that English usage allows certain experiences to be identified (by Harris and many others) under the description ‘spiritual and not religious’, it does not automatically follow that they can be fully and adequately understood without any reference to religious categories of thought. To give an analogy: from the fact that certain phenomena are identified by many people as ‘mental and not physical’, it does not follow that they can be fully and adequately understood without any reference to physical phenomena (if *that* followed, we would have an altogether too easy argument for mind-body dualism!).¹² Whether a fully adequate account of spiritual experience can indeed be supplied within a secularist framework is a question that remains to be decided.

A second but related caveat that needs to be entered here is that linguistic labels, even when sanctioned by ordinary usage, can often conceal questionable metaphysical presuppositions. Harris, like many militant atheists, wears the mantle of the impartial and empirically oriented scientist.

⁸ Sam Harris, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014). How far religious believers do actually subscribe to the radically dualistic ontology that Harris implicitly attributes to them is a question for another paper.

⁹ Compare for example a recent five-week clinical project that ‘used combined Tai Chi and mindfulness-based stress reduction’ as an educational program. According to the study, ‘statements the boys and girls made in the process suggested that they experienced well-being, calmness, relaxation, improved sleep, less reactivity, increased self-care, self-awareness, and a sense of interconnection or interdependence with nature.’ R. B. Wall, ‘Tai Chi and mindfulness-based stress reduction in a Boston Public Middle School’, *Journal of Paediatric Healthcare* Vol. 19, 4 (2005), pp. 230-7, opening abstract.

¹⁰ Harris, *Waking Up*, pp. 5, 14, 17, 18, 43.

¹¹ Harris, *Waking Up*, p. 203.

¹² Compare Antoine Arnauld’s criticisms of Descartes’s arguments in the Fourth Set of Objections to the *Meditations* [1641].

Thus, in his book *Waking Up*, subtitled *A Guide to Spirituality without Religion*, he tells his readers that ‘nothing in this book needs to be accepted on faith’, since all the assertions ‘can be tested in the laboratory of your own life.’¹³ But the spurious image of the laboratory masks a vision of ultimate reality that is actually metaphysical, not scientific. Harris’s spiritual experiences, he claims, disclose a reality where there are no true substances and there is ultimately nothing but an impersonal flux of conditions that arise and pass away, and ‘the conventional self is a transitory experience among transitory experiences’.¹⁴ Yet if the results of his reported spiritual experience are supposed to count as empirical confirmation of this impersonalist vision of reality, then Harris has left himself no justification for dismissing as ‘crazy’ those countless theists whose own spiritual experience has, by contrast, seemed to them to disclose the nature of reality as deeply and ultimately personal. Talk of the ‘laboratory’ of experience is not going to help very much here, since clearly everything is going to depend not on measurement of ‘data’ or other such scientific procedures, but on the character of the experiences in question and how they are interpreted.

The upshot of all this is that whatever contemporary usage may or may not sanction regarding the current employment of the term ‘spiritual’, all the interesting questions about the significance of the term, and whether it can be fully and coherently detached from the religious domain, are not going to be decidable on linguistic grounds alone; for they are inextricably bound up with the stance we take on more substantive issues about the *meaning* of the spiritual and the role it plays in our lives. To these more substantive questions we shall now turn.

3. *Spirituality and the cosmos*

In many powerful accounts of spiritual experience in literature, two elements that are strikingly prominent are, first, that such experience has a profoundly *human* dimension, being connected with our deepest human responses and aspirations, and, second, that such experience has what might be called a *cosmic* dimension, being somehow concerned with the ultimate nature of reality as a whole, and our relationship to it. Few writers have produced more eloquent reflections on the character of spiritual experience than George Eliot, as in the following passage from her first novel, *Adam Bede*:

Our caresses, our tender words, our still rapture under the influence of Autumn sunsets, or pillared vistas, or calm majestic statues, or Beethoven symphonies, all bring with them the consciousness that they are mere waves and ripples in an unfathomable ocean of love and beauty; our emotion in its keenest moment passes from expression into silence, our love at its highest flood rushes beyond its object and loses itself in the sense of divine mystery.¹⁵

The passage identifies some very typical and characteristic examples falling under the genre of spiritual experience as commonly understood: passionate reactions to the beauties of the natural world (‘rapture’ at ‘Autumn sunsets’); powerful responses to great works of art (‘majestic statues’, ‘Beethoven symphonies’); and the interactions, laden with deep significance, that arise between people who are in close personal relationships (‘caresses’, ‘tender words’). Although all three types of phenomenon are far from mundane – their heightened importance signals that they raise us above the humdrum world of daily routine and toil – they are all nevertheless a precious part of our human birthright, indispensable elements of what it is to be a fully flourishing human being, and something without which our species would be immeasurably poorer.

But alongside (but by no means unrelated to) this very human dimension, there is also, as skilfully emphasised by Eliot, something more. In having an experience that falls under one of the categories she describes, we are made dimly aware that what is happening to us somehow enables

¹³ Harris, *Waking Up*, p. 7.

¹⁴ Harris, *Waking Up*, p. 206.

¹⁵ George Eliot, *Adam Bede* [1859], Bk I, Ch. 3.

us to participate in something momentous – something that is more than a mere subjective psychological episode, and which connects us with an objective framework of meaning and value that is not of our own making. Language tends to falter here, since by its very nature this ‘cosmic’ dimension (as I am calling it for want of a better term) transcends the domain to which our ordinary everyday language is fitted, adapted as it is to help us survive and cope with the immediate demands of the world around us. But as Eliot puts it, grappling with symbolic and metaphorical expressions in order to reach at what she wants to convey, there is a sense that these powerful and rapturous spiritual responses connect us with something greater – that they are ‘are mere waves and ripples in an unfathomable ocean of love and beauty.’

Note that Eliot herself is not being explicitly religious here – at least not in the sense that she is defending the truth of any specific religious dogma. Nor indeed was she herself religious in the conventional institutional sense, having a number of serious doubts about the metaphysical doctrines of Christianity. Influenced by David Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach (both of whom she translated),¹⁶ she inclined if anything towards an agnostic and humanistic stance, which valued Christianity more for its moral teachings than for its theological dogmas. Elsewhere in *Adam Bede*, the eponymous protagonist comes close to voicing what may well have been Eliot’s own view of the matter when he says ‘I’ve seen pretty clear ever since I was a young un, as religion’s something else besides doctrines and notions.’¹⁷ The thought here is that the moral and practical components of Christianity – right conduct, and loving and generous emotions – are what count, rather than the theological ideas and theories embodied in this or that creed or catechism.

Yet although Eliot, in common with many nineteenth-century thinkers, was evidently attracted by what can broadly be called a humanistic interpretation of Christianity,¹⁸ it is clear from the passage quoted at the start of this section that her vision of the content of spiritual experience cannot be understood *merely* in terms of human moral aspirations. The ‘unfathomable ocean of beauty and love’ of which the passage speaks, let alone the talk of ‘divine mystery’, implies that our human activities and emotions are not the entire story – they are but ‘waves and ripples’, as Eliot puts it, in a greater whole. So it is not just that experiencing the beauties of nature or art or of close personal affection is very important and valuable in our lives (though that of course is true); more than that, such experience draws us forward and beyond ourselves, Eliot seems to be saying, and enables us somehow to be part of, or at one with, something mysterious which cannot be properly grasped or named, but which we sense as the unfathomable source from which there flows all that is good and meaningful in human life.

If this is what spiritual experience, at its deepest is (and I submit that most readers who honestly interrogate themselves will find that phenomenologically Eliot’s description rings true, at least to some degree), then something like a ‘cosmic’ dimension in our most profound spiritual experiences seems hard to deny. And then it begins to seem as if the whole project of secularizing, or ‘humanizing’ or ‘demythologizing’ spirituality, and hence the whole project of insisting that one can be ‘spiritual without being religious’, may turn out to be more problematic than at first appeared. To be sure, the terms ‘religion’ and ‘religious’ are broad ones, which defy simple definition,¹⁹ and as we have already seen, there are recognized spiritual practices that do not

¹⁶ The German liberal Protestant theologian David Strauss’s *Life of Jesus* [*Das Leben Jesu*, 1836] created a stir at the time by treating the Gospel writings from a purely ‘historical’ perspective, denying that the miracles, for example, were actual occurrences, and interpreting them purely on a mythical level. Eliot’s English translation was published in 1846. More radically still, Ludwig Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity* [*Das Wesen des Christentums*, 1841] interpreted the idea of God as a projection or externalization of man’s moral nature; Eliot’s English version appeared in 1854.

¹⁷ Eliot, *Adam Bede*, Ch. 17.

¹⁸ Perhaps the most famous example is Leo Tolstoy; see for example his *What I Believe* [*V chyom moya vera?*, 1885].

¹⁹ There is a large literature on the vexed question of how to define the term ‘religion’, which it would take far more space than is available to attempt to summarize here. A valuable starting point for discussion is Emile

presuppose religious belief in the sense of allegiance to a theistic worldview. And certainly it would be absurd to suggest that spiritual experience is available only to those who are explicit ‘believers’, as that term is normally understood in for example the Abrahamic religions. But even when all that is granted, the task of philosophical ‘examination’ still requires us to reflect seriously about the character and content of the deep spiritual experiences under discussion. What exactly is the ‘cosmic’ dimension that seems irresistibly to manifest itself to the experiencing subject? Is it just a vague sense the subject has that he or she is part of a wider process? Or is there (as is suggested by Eliot’s talk of an unfathomable source of love and beauty), an inescapable *moral* dimension, something like an awareness of, or a confrontation with, an ‘enduring power, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness’, in Matthew Arnold’s solemn phrase.²⁰ For if the latter is the case (and we shall be exploring this in more detail in the following section), it may begin to look after all as if the experiences in question are comfortably locatable only within something very like a theistic worldview.

It is of course true that the account of spiritual feelings found in *Adam Bede* comes from an author who was brought up in, and surrounded by, a strongly entrenched theistic culture. So today’s anti-religious sceptic might argue that, in spite of her better rational self, Eliot’s language inevitably bears the traces of the traditional religious outlook of her time; and further, that the modern advocate of ‘spirituality without religion’ should be able, in our more fully enlightened and secularized milieu, to provide an account of the spiritual which dispenses with the theistic backdrop entirely. This is certainly the aim of Sam Harris, who tells us he wants to salvage the ‘important psychological truths’ from the ‘rubble’, or to ‘pluck the diamond from the dunghill of esoteric religion’.²¹

It’s remarkable, however, that despite these official aspirations to purge away all the religious elements, what we actually find in the descriptions which Harris and others who think like him give of their spiritual experience is language with a ‘cosmic’ flavour very similar to that which we find in Eliot. As already noted, Harris talks of ‘boundless love’, and a sense of ‘being at one with the cosmos’. And in similar vein, his fellow atheist Christopher Hitchens spoke towards the end of his life of deep experiences of the beauties of great music, or art, or the natural world, as giving him a sense of ‘what you could call the Numinous, the Transcendent ...’²² But here we have a curious paradox. From the official standpoint of the hard-nosed materialist-atheist, to describe such experiences as ‘transcendent’, or ‘numinous’, or as connecting them with an ocean of ‘boundless love’ must necessarily be simply a *façon de parler* – a way of talking that lacks any ontological basis, or which does not point to any ultimate objective reality. For their officially held view maintains that the natural world studied by science is, ontologically speaking, all that there really is; and though there may be heightened or altered states of consciousness, like those Sam Harris has expressed an interest in studying (produced, he says, by fasting, meditation and ‘psychotropic plants’),²³ these are understood as purely subjective effects of various brain changes, arising as by-products of evolved physiological processes originally generated by the needs of survival in the ordinary natural world. The idea of anything more to the story than this, anything ontologically extra that transcends the material world, is for Harris and those who think like him, simply an illusion, resulting from the fact that we humans are ‘deeply disposed to broadcast our own subjectivity onto the world’²⁴ (an idea derived from one of the founding fathers of modern

Durkheim’s account in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [*Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, 1912], trans. C. Cosman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), Ch. 1.

²⁰ Matthew Arnold, *Literature and Dogma* [1873], Ch. 1.

²¹ Harris, *Waking Up*, pp. 5 and 10.

²² Christopher Hitchens, in debate with Tony Blair [2010], quoted in Jules Evans, ‘The New Atheists are actually transcendentalists’, <http://philosophyforlife.org/the-new-atheists-are-actually-transcendentalists/>, posted 24 January 2014.

²³ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (New York: Norton, 2005), Ch. 7, p. 210.

²⁴ Sam Harris, ‘The Mortal Dangers of Religious Faith’, interview at <http://www.amazon.com/gp/feature.html?docId=542154>

atheism, David Hume, when he observed that ‘the mind has a great propensity to spread itself on external objects’²⁵).²⁶

But what in the scientific worldview that such atheists so prize could possibly licence the idea that the jangling of particle interactions, unfolding impersonally without purpose or any intrinsic significance whatsoever, could constitute an ocean of love and beauty; or what could justify the notion of a deep harmony, between myself and these supposedly blank, impersonal and purposeless phenomena, so that I am able to feel myself ‘at one with the cosmos’? To be fair to Harris’s position, he does in his more cautious moments pull back from any implied commitment to what I have called the ‘cosmic’ dimension of spiritual experience. Feeling at one with the cosmos, he observes at one point, ‘says a lot about the possibilities of human consciousness, but it says nothing about the universe at large ... nor does it suggest that the “energy” of love somehow pervades the cosmos.’ All that such feelings do, he goes on to say, is ‘tell us a lot about the human mind’: they tell us that such experiences do as a matter of fact occur if you adopt the right techniques (Buddhist-style *metta* meditation, for instance), or ‘taking the right drug’.²⁷

Yet this kind of strategy, reducing spiritual experience to a mere subjective psychological state, has an enormous cost. It robs such experience of any significance beyond that of some kind of private ‘trip’, which may make me ‘feel good’, but does not disclose anything important about the way things are. Harris himself, as we have seen, speaks of spiritual experiences as among the most ‘important and transformative’ experiences humans can have. But if I simply take a pill that makes everything look green for twenty-four hours, even though such experience may, if replicated with many different subjects, be ‘scientifically well attested’, there is no reason whatever to suppose that it is important or transformative in any interesting way – even if it makes me say ‘Wow!’ and go round for a time with a euphoric smile on my face. Even if the experience is one of undifferentiated benevolence or love, or some other ‘oceanic’ feeling,²⁸ it is not going to be transformative in any interesting way (as those who witnessed or participated in the short-lived vacuities of the ‘psychedelic’ and ‘hippy’ movements of the 1970s will be able to confirm), unless it is more than an interior episode. An psychological event or brain change might of course have great significance if it discloses something about what is going on outside me (if it is involved in my appreciating a great piece of music, or conversing with a loved one, for example); but then it is *ex hypothesi* more than just an interior change.

Authentic spiritual experience is not merely a psychological episode but is inextricably bound up with a certain kind of spiritual *transformation*; and if we start to unpack the phenomenology of the change we quickly see that it has a distinctively moral character, in the broad sense of that term. I have a sense of being confronted with something beyond myself that I perceive to be good, or worthy of my admiration or love or respect, and as demanding a response from me whether I like it or not. To this vital moral dimension of spiritual experience we must now turn.

4. *The moral dimension*

Part of the problem in understanding what is meant by spirituality is that in our fragmented and compartmentalized modern culture we tend to split the flow of our human existence into separate compartments. There is our ‘job’ versus our ‘free time’ – but where do philosophizing, or talking with a partner, or playing with one’s children fit into that dichotomy? There are our ‘moral’ sensibilities versus our ‘aesthetic’ sensibilities, but to which set of capacities does a great literary

²⁵ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* [1739-40], Book I, Part 3, section xiv..

²⁶ The foregoing paragraph draws partly on material from my *How to Believe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), Ch. 2

²⁷ Harris, *Waking Up*, pp. 43-4.

²⁸ For this term, see André Comte-Sponville, *The Book of Atheist Spirituality* [originally published as *L’esprit de l’athéisme*, 2006] (London: Bantam, 2008), pp. 150ff. The term was discussed much earlier by Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and its discontents* [*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, 1929], §1; transl. in *The Penguin Freud Library* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), Vol. 12.

work like Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or Jane Austin's *Persuasion* appeal? Or again, there is the 'moral' domain versus the domain of 'the natural world', but (as I have argued in other writings) it is impossible to read the 'nature' poetry of William Wordsworth properly without becoming aware that the poet's reflections are inextricable fusions of the moral and the aesthetic: his exaltation and joy at the beauty of the woods and fields is closely bound up with a deep sense of their goodness and of the 'blessing' that they bestow, a sense in turn linked to the upwelling in him of love and sympathy for humankind.²⁹

If we turn to the 'praxis' component of spirituality – the performances, disciplines and routines which have traditionally been part of a spiritual way of life – we can find this same comprehensiveness or inclusiveness as regards the faculties and capacities involved, and the same moral thread running through them all. Ignatius of Loyola was famous for his 'spiritual exercises' designed to be undertaken systematically during the course of a retreat lasting many days.³⁰ Such exercises, or similar ones still widely practised today in Ignatian and other forms of spirituality, include prayer, fasting, meditation, *lectio divina* (the attentive reading of Scripture), participating in communal worship, group activities such as singing psalms, individual self-examination and confession, and moments of prayer or reflective silence at key moments of the day (for example before eating, or before retiring).

Spiritual exercises are typically *multivalent* – they work on many different levels, including the emotional, the physical, the aesthetic and the moral; and it is important to add that they operate in ways that are not always directly accessible to the conscious reflective mind. A paradigm case of a spiritual practice, familiar from the Benedictine and other monastic traditions, is the singing of Psalms. This originally involved learning the complete set by heart and reinforcing the memory through regular repetition, day by day and month by month. But the recitation is no mere intellectual exercise, but an embodied ritual, involving physical movements of standing and sitting and bowing, the taking up of each verse antiphonally, by alternating sides of the choir, and of course the music, the plainsong chant, which not only requires careful breathing and close attention to the rhythm of the words, but a constant listening by each singer, to match his intonation to that of his neighbours.³¹

One reason that music is so important here is that its effects on us, both as listeners and as participants, engage the whole person, physically, emotionally, intellectually, and also in deeper, more diffusive ways, operating below the threshold of consciousness, which we scarcely understand. Music at its best (and the same goes for the finest literature and visual art) have this ineffable quality – they speak to something deep within us, yet at the same time somehow take us outside ourselves to a more exalted plane. Such music is, as T. S. Eliot put it in one of his most religiously sensitive poems:

²⁹ See John Cottingham, 'Human Nature and the Transcendent', in Constantine Sandis and M. J. Cain (ed.), *Human Nature*. Royal Institute of Philosophy supplement 70 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 233-254, where I discuss key passages from Wordsworth's *The Prelude*.

³⁰ Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises* [*Ejercicios espirituales*, c. 1525], trans. J. Munitz and P. Endean (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996). Ignatius's original Spanish text was first published posthumously in 1615, but a Latin translation (*Exercitia Spiritualia*) was published in Rome, with papal approval, in 1548.

³¹ Further discussion the multivalent aspects of psalm singing and other spiritual practices may be found in John Cottingham, 'Theism and Spirituality' in C. Taliaferro, V. Harrison, and S. Goetz (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Theism* (New York: Routledge, 2013), Ch 50, pp. 654-665.

music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.³²

The ability of great art to generate ‘self-transcendence’ is something that many secularists are happy to acknowledge; indeed some have suggested that all we need of a ‘spiritual’ kind can be supplied by music, art or literature, thus making religion redundant. Salmon Rushdie has argued that literature can and ought to fill this role, and aim to capture what he calls ‘the soaring quality of transcendence’:

It is for art to capture that experience, to offer it to, in the case of literature, its readers; to be, for a secular, materialist culture, some sort of replacement for what the love of god offers in the world of faith.³³

But one problem with this kind of position is that the implied exclusive dichotomy between the domain of religion on the one hand and the domain of art on the other is in many respects misleading. For clearly some of the greatest visual art and literature and music in our culture is inherently religious. Those who juxtapose art and religion as opposites may well have in mind a very one-sided image of religion as what is purveyed by fundamentalists who subscribe to rigid dogmas and literalist interpretations of the Bible. Such fundamentalist approaches are, of course, to be found; but elsewhere, for example in the great liturgical heritage of Catholic and Anglican and Orthodox Christianity, one can find forms of spirituality that are inextricably intertwined with some of the most resonant and ‘soaring’ literature and art and music that humanity has ever produced.

An even more important aspect of religious spirituality, which provides a further reason to suppose there is something suspect about the project of replacing it with art, is that it has an overwhelmingly *moral* purpose. Art of a secular kind is answerable to all sorts of standards, some detached from any moral concerns whatsoever; but the overriding aim of authentic spiritual praxis is to facilitate the emergence of a better self, purged of wasteful and destructive and self-absorbed inclinations and desires, and able to begin the task of growing, no doubt slowly and painfully, into the self one was meant to be – in short to embark on the traditional Benedictine task of self-transformation, or ‘conversion of life’.³⁴ We are back with the Socratic idea of ‘care of the soul’.

Moving our attention from spiritual praxis to the other component of spirituality we have been focusing on, namely spiritual experience, we find that the pervasive moral dimension is even more apparent. An experience that was merely diverting or titillating, or shocking or entertaining or enjoyable, or even just very emotionally moving, could not count as a spiritual experience; there has to be something deeper, more resonant and more meaningful for the life of the subject and his or her moral development.

Such experience takes a specifically theistic form in many remarkable passages in the Hebrew Bible, as in one of the Psalms where the speaker is overwhelmed by a sense of divine

³² T. S. Eliot, ‘The Dry Salvages’ [1941], subsequently incorporated into *Four Quartets* [1943]. I am grateful to Jay Parini for his comments on this passage in a talk on ‘Eliot’s Four Quartets as a Pattern for Christian Living’, given at Heythrop College, London in May 2016.

³³ Salmon Rushdie, ‘Is Nothing Sacred?’, in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991), p. 425-6. Cited in Rebecca Stott, ‘The Wetfooted Understory: Darwinian Immersions’, in G. Levine (ed.), *The Joy of Secularism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 206. For a similar argument that art can and should be a replacement for religion, see Alain de Botton and John Armstrong, *Art as Therapy* (London: Phaidon, 2013).

³⁴ The Rule of St Benedict, dating from the sixth century AD, speaks in Chapter 58 of a *conversatio morum*, a difficult term to translate, but one which, as the context makes clear, implies a continuous reshaping and renewal of one’s habits of behaviour, character and entire way of life.

power. God is described as the one who ‘breaks the cedars of Lebanon and makes Lebanon skip like a calf’, who ‘shakes the wilderness and strips the forests bare, while all in the temple cry “Glory”’.³⁵ The cry of ‘Glory’ (in Hebrew *kavod* כְּבוֹד) signifies something weighty with significance, sacred, mysterious, a manifestation of the divine, as conveyed in the description of the pillar of fire and cloud which led the Israelites out of Egypt, or the cloud atop Mount Sinai where God’s law was manifest to Moses.³⁶ We are not talking of ‘natural beauty’ in the attenuated modern sense, but of something fearful that calls forth reverence and awe, like the burning bush, flaming but never consumed, where Moses was told to keep his distance.³⁷ These are not ‘impressive sights’, of the kind familiar from television nature programmes, but events pregnant with moral significance, as is clear from the lines from an earlier Psalm, where the forests are said to ‘sing for joy’ because *the world is to be judged*.³⁸ In psychological or phenomenological terms, what is happening here is an experience where the subject is overwhelmed by the power and beauty of nature in a way that is somehow intertwined with awareness of one’s own weakness and imperfection, and a sense of confrontation with the inexorable demands of justice and righteousness. In short, the spiritual experience in question involves the kind of awareness which enables one to see the world transfigured, so that it is irradiated with meaning and value, and the human subject, caught up in that mystery, is unmistakably called on to be no longer a spectator, a mere ‘tourist’, but to *respond*, to be a morally responsive agent, part of a cosmos that is shot through with the divine.

The upshot of all this is that spiritual experience in what I have been calling its ‘cosmic’ dimension is, in today’s somewhat awkward philosophical jargon, ‘normative’: we are dealing with intensely personal encounters, infused with awe and charged with moral significance, where the individual feels him or herself to be checked, to be scrutinized, and to be called upon to respond and to change.

In the work of many creative artists, by contrast, particularly in the last two centuries, we see a resistance to any kind of alignment between art and morality. Yet one can certainly point to some non-religious works of art which do seem to have a morally demanding aspect³⁹ And it is also true that certain non-theistic meditative forms of spirituality such as those found in Buddhism and other Eastern traditions, have ethical teachings attached to them. But the goals that are sought in those traditions, and enthusiastically taken up by the secularists we referred to earlier – involving notions like impersonal and boundless oceanic wellbeing – seem to have an essentially quietist character. The paramount objective is achieving bliss by detaching oneself from the stressful world of struggle, commitment and dependency. To be sure, many of the Eastern sages are famous for enjoining right conduct and the practice of virtue, so in this sense there is an ethical component involved. But it is not a component that is intrinsically connected to the underlying vision of the cosmos; for the Eastern vision is one in which personal commitments and demands are based on an illusion, and ultimate reality is simply an impersonal continuum of conditions that arise and pass away. There is a fundamental contrast here with the kind of sacred vision found in some of the passages from the Bible quoted above, or with that of Isaiah, when he sees the temple shaking and billowing with smoke, and the earth and heaven filled with God’s *glory* (here again we have the term that is so prominent in Jewish spirituality, *kavod*).⁴⁰ For when the prophet witnesses this vision, his first reaction is to cry ‘Woe is me!’ The experience he has involves a vivid intermingling

³⁵ Psalm 29 [28]: 5-9. My discussion of this and the following examples (from Exodus and Isaiah) of spiritual experience as it figures in the Bible is based on a passage from Chapter 5 of Cottingham, *How to Believe*.

³⁶ Exodus 13:21; 16:10; 24:16.

³⁷ Exodus 3:5.

³⁸ Psalm 96 [95]: 11-13.

³⁹ A possible example may be found in Rainer Maria Rilke’s sonnet *Archaischer Torso Apollons* [from *Der Neuen Gedichte anderer Teil*, 1908], which I translate and discuss in ‘The Self, The Good Life, and the Transcendent’, in N. Athanassoulis and S. Vice (ed.), *The Moral Life: Essays in Honour of John Cottingham* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 255-6.

⁴⁰ Isaiah 6: 1-4.

of the aesthetic with the moral, and even as he is overwhelmed by the ‘glory’, he acutely feels his own failures and those of his people, so that he forthwith resolves to try to set things right. Such a vision, radically different from vague oceanic feelings of wellbeing and oneness, is a ‘normative’ vision – one that carries with it inescapable demands. It is a vision that makes no sense without the two poles of the human condition that Blaise Pascal underlined– our wretchedness, or sinfulness, and our redeemability would we but turn towards the good.⁴¹

5 .Coda: philosophy and the spiritual

It has been no part of my purpose in this paper to disparage the recent interest in spirituality among contemporary atheist thinkers – on the contrary, I think it is thoroughly to be welcomed. But the favourable interpretation of theistic spirituality offered above, together with the reservations expressed about alternative non-theistic forms, may suggest to some readers that this paper has, as it were, imperialistic ambitions, and aims to browbeat those who describe themselves as spiritual into admitting that they are really theists whether they know it or not. But polemical arguments seldom provide much enlightenment in philosophy, and would-be coercive philosophical strategies rarely succeed in getting anyone to shift their position. What I have been aiming to do, in a much lower key, is to suggest that when we unpack exactly what is involved in the activities and experiences we call spiritual, it is not easy to make fully adequate sense of spirituality, and of its importance for human life, without a something very close to a theistic framework.

The theologian Karl Rahner once used the term ‘anonymous Christians’ to describe those who do not adopt, or have never heard of, the Christian faith, but who may nevertheless achieve salvation through good works and through following their consciences, albeit, unbeknownst to them, none of this would have been possible but for the salvific sacrifice of Christ.⁴² The phrase ‘anonymous Christian’ is a controversial one which has irritated many critics, but for present purposes we may perhaps extract from it a simple philosophical point, namely that one may respond to a divine reality without doing so *under that description* (just as someone may be aware of a flash of lightening, but not be aware of it under the description ‘electrical discharge’). Applying this to case in hand, the gist of my argument has been that the profound importance for human life of those deep transformative experiences we call ‘spiritual’, together with the moral response that is demanded from us through the working of such experiences, provides some support for thinking the reality glimpsed in such experiences is of the kind envisaged by a theistic worldview, even though it may not be experienced under that description. For either the moral demand is an illusion (something that those who take spiritual experience seriously are unlikely to want to say), or else there is something in the nature of the cosmos that grounds the demand. If there are indeed ‘irreducibly normative truths’⁴³ that we access through such experiences – moral truths, in other words, that are not reducible to factual truths about the natural world, which have objective authority over us and require us to act in certain ways – these will not fit easily within the prevailing naturalistic conception of the world in which in which there is no objective source of

⁴¹ *Misère de l’homme sans Dieu . . . Félicité de l’homme avec Dieu*. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* [1670], ed. L. Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1962), no 6.

⁴² ‘Anonymous Christianity means that a person lives in the grace of God and attains salvation outside of explicitly constituted Christianity. Let us take a Buddhist monk, who, because he follows his conscience, attains salvation and lives in the grace of God: of him I must say that he is an anonymous Christian. . . . If I hold that everyone depends upon Jesus Christ for salvation, and if at the same time I hold that many live in the world who have not expressly recognized Jesus Christ, then there remains in my opinion nothing else but to take up this postulate of an anonymous Christianity.’ *Karl Rahner in Dialogue* (Spring Valley, NY: Crossroads Publishing, 1959), p. 135 (slightly adapted).

⁴³ The phrase is Derek Parfit’s, in *On What Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Part II, p. 464. It should be added that although Parfit recognizes the objectivity and ‘irreducible normativity’ of these authoritative moral demands, he denies that there need be anything whatsoever in reality that grounds these truths.

authority or normativity, and where the only ultimate constituents of the world are the physical objects studied by science.⁴⁴

All this brings us back, in conclusion, to the role of philosophy in the deeper of the two Socratic senses referred to at the start of this paper, namely what Pierre Hadot has called ‘philosophy as a way of life’ – something of profound moral importance that impinges on the entire character and purpose of one’s existence.⁴⁵ In this deeper sense, philosophy is part of a process of radical interior change – *metanoia* is the Greek term – a change of heart, a change of the kind that leads to a fundamental shift in the flow and direction of one’s life.⁴⁶ As we have seen, spiritual practice in its traditional forms has aimed at just that – though one should perhaps add that philosophical inquiry tends to contribute to this process at an intellectual and reflective level, while the practices of spirituality characteristically engage more directly with a whole range of emotional, imaginative and behavioural responses. But the truth of theism, if it is true, completes this picture in the most satisfying way possible, by ensuring that the process of change has an ultimate goal, being directed towards that which is objectively good and that wherein our ultimate fulfilment lies. Or, to close with a phrase from Michel Foucault, ‘there is, in the truth and in the access to it, something which fulfils the subject and completes, or transfigures, the very being of the subject.’⁴⁷

⁴⁴ If naturalism fails, it is of course theoretically possible that the ultimate nature of the cosmos might be such as to accommodate other realities, of a non-theistic kind (such as Platonic forms perhaps), which might ground irreducibly normative truths of the kind accessed in spiritual experience. Another, more interesting possibility is that such normativity might be grounded in what Fiona Ellis has called an ‘enriched’ or ‘expansive’ naturalism; see her *God, Value, and Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). These possibilities cannot be explored and evaluated with the space available in the present paper.

⁴⁵ See note 6, above.

⁴⁶ In its New Testament usage, the term *metanoia* may be translated ‘repentance’ or ‘conversion’; cf. Acts of the Apostles: ‘God hath granted repentance unto life’ (*metanoian eis zoēn*)’ (11:18).

⁴⁷ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, p. 16. I am most grateful to the editor of this volume, David McPherson, for extremely helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.