

Self, Spirituality, and Mysticism

with William Simpson, "The Mystical Stance: The Experience of Self-Loss and Daniel Dennett's 'Center of Narrative Gravity'"; David Rousseau, "A Systems Model of Spirituality"; and David James Stewart, "The Emergence of Consciousness in Genesis 1–3: Jung's Depth Psychology and Theological Anthropology"

A SYSTEMS MODEL OF SPIRITUALITY

by David Rousseau

Abstract. Within the scientific study of spirituality there are substantial ambiguities and uncertainties about relevant concepts, terms, evidences, methods, and relationships. Different disciplinary approaches reveal or emphasize different aspects of spirituality, such as outcomes, behaviors, skills, ambitions, and beliefs. I argue that these aspects interdepend in a way that constitutes a "systems model of spirituality." This model enables a more holistic understanding of the nature of spirituality, and suggests a new definition that disambiguates spirituality from related concepts such as religion, cultural sophistication, and prosocial behavior in animals. It also exposes important open questions about the nature of spirituality. To support the emerging scientific approach to the study of spirituality, I propose the development of a "philosophy of spirituality" that can clarify the conceptual terrain, identify important research directions, and facilitate a comprehensive and interdisciplinary investigation into the nature, validity, and implications of spirituality's conceptual and practical entailments.

Keywords: ontology of spirituality; philosophy of spirituality; spirituality; spiritual intelligence; systems model of spirituality; systems philosophy; value realism; worldview

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the term "spiritual" has been synonymous with the term "religious," and this association persists in the present day, as illustrated by the

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twenty-five volumes of the series *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest* (1985–1994) edited by Ewert Cousins. Likewise, the term “spirituality” has historically been treated as a noun deriving from this use of the term “spiritual,” and hence relating to beliefs, attitudes, and practices grounded in religious concerns with matters of spirit. For this reason the term “spirituality” does not traditionally warrant a dictionary definition (McSherry and Cash 2004, 157).

However, as religious convictions declined in Western societies over the last century, alternative meanings for the terms “spiritual” and “spirituality” have developed, reflecting a process whereby individuals “have created their own personal theory of spirituality” (McSherry and Cash 2004, 153), and in terms of which people characterize themselves as “spiritual but not religious” (Hay and Hunt 2000). Although theology departments and schools of religion continue to use the term “spirituality” in its traditional sense, the emerging “secular” notion of spirituality has become a distinct subject of academic interest both within and beyond theology and religious studies, as well as a subject of interdisciplinary dialogue.

Exactly how this contemporary distinction between spirituality and religiosity should be understood is still a matter of much and complex debate, and one aim of this article is to contribute to this discussion. To understand this new notion of spirituality, it is necessary to investigate it from a secular-philosophical and scientific perspective, because this emerging notion of spirituality explicitly distances itself from a grounding in religious doctrine. As such, this article will ignore theologically based studies that use the term spirituality to refer to religiosity. In this article references to “spirituality” should therefore be taken to be the emerging secular conception and not as co-extensive with religiosity in the traditional manner. To set the stage for the development of the article’s main argument some basic indications regarding the terminological and contextual issues will be useful.

Research suggests that in contemporary usage people call themselves “spiritual but not religious” as “a way of putting distance between oneself and religion, while holding onto something regarded as good” (King and Koenig 2009, 2). Religious leaders have affirmed such understanding of the term “spirituality”; for example, the Dalai Lama has commented that “our spirituality [is] the full richness and simple wholesomeness of our basic human values” and “. . . spirituality is a human journey into our internal resources, with the aim of understanding who we are in the deepest sense and of discovering how to live according to the highest possible idea” (Dalai Lama 2007, 220). Spirituality in this sense appears to be a common ground between people who are religious and certain people who are atheistic or agnostic, for example, it involves for both groups (as mentioned above) “holding on to something regarded as good” (King and Koenig 2009, 2) and the “recognition that there is more to existence than purely the secular and the material” (McSherry and Cash 2004, 154). Thus the

Table 1. Modern distinction between James's "institutional" and "personal" branches of religion

"Institutional religion"	"Personal religion"
Religious	Spiritual
Religiosity	Spirituality
Religion	Spirituality

modern contrasting of the term "spiritual" with "religious" appears to be consistent with the distinction William James made between "personal religion" and "institutional religion" (James 1902[1928], 28–31). To formalize these distinctions I propose using the relevant terms as indicated in Table 1.

As the table reveals, in contemporary usage "spirituality" can be employed not only as an alternative to "religiosity" but also as an alternative to "religion".

It is noteworthy that both in James's and in modern usage what is here designated as "spirituality" represents a set of views, dispositions, and behaviors that are broadly speaking a subset of the views, dispositions, and behaviors comprising what is here designated as "religion." On this understanding one can be "spiritual but not religious" but (probably) not "religious but not spiritual."

As will be discussed later, spirituality is very widespread in modern Western societies. This suggests that the decline of religious belief in Western societies does not amount to such a wholesale breakdown of transcendental perspectives as this is normally taken to imply. In this light the scientific study of spirituality has the potential to bring new insights into the "deep nature" of religion, by providing insights into the deep nature of persons and their relation to the world. In this sense, such scientific research would require significant inputs from philosophy, and the findings may in turn carry significant implications for philosophy, including the philosophy of religion. As John Cottingham pointed out, "only when we come to have a broader sense of the 'spiritual dimension' within which religion lives and moves, can we begin to see fully what is involved in accepting or rejecting a religious view of reality" (Cottingham 2005, x).

Although an enormous amount of academic work has been done in the last few decades to investigate the nature of spirituality, the exact connotations and denotation of the term "spirituality" are still a subject of research and substantial debate, with many authors arguing that the term is "multi-dimensional and ambiguous" (Tanyi 2006, 287), "has several layers of meaning" (McSherry and Cash 2004, 151), and is "without consensual definition" (McBrien 2006, 43).

The vast majority of the academic research on this question has been done by the healthcare profession. This is motivated by the recognition that

spirituality has a positive bearing on health and welfare (Koenig 2008), and hence it is increasingly becoming a requirement on healthcare professionals to respect and support people's spiritual needs (McSherry, Cash, and Ross 2004, 935). However, this cannot be achieved if there are no reliable measures of the state of spirituality in health care (Cobb, Dowrick, and Lloyd-Williams 2012a, 339) or there is a dichotomy between professional assumptions and patient expectations regarding spirituality (McSherry, Cash, and Ross 2004, 934).

Despite substantial academic effort, perspectives on spirituality are still in a state of flux. Many models of spirituality have been developed, but they are often grounded in very different kinds of categories. For example, Wilfred McSherry's "principal components model" identified six components of spirituality he designated as individuality, inclusivity, integrated, inter/intradisciplinary, innate, and institution (McSherry 2006), while Mark Cobb and colleagues developed a "synoptic view" focused on the nine factors they called personal beliefs, ways of seeing the world, values and goals, behavior and practice, personal experience, social engagement, social experiences, disease, and illness, dying, and death (Cobb et al. 2012a). Furthermore, different researchers using the same analysis technique sometimes produce very dissimilar results. For example, in performing a concept analysis of "spirituality" using the method of Lorraine Walker and Kay Avant (1995), Ruth Tanyi identified the "antecedents" to spirituality as having "life and spirit," with "life" meaning the period of existence between birth and death, and "spirit" implying the ability to interact freely, have a belief system, and to initiate and maintain meaningful relationships (Tanyi 2002, 505), while Barry McBrien identified the antecedents as "pivotal life events such as illness" and "the search for meaning [involving] the need to understand the threatening event" (McBrien 2006, 44).

This diversity notwithstanding, a review of the literature does suggest that progress is being made, and that academic perspectives are (slowly) converging regarding the nature, dependencies, and consequences of spirituality (Cobb, Puchalski, and Rumbold 2012b). However, this hopeful scenario also has to be regarded with some caution. The healthcare profession's dominance of academic research into spirituality produces a risk that the emerging academic understanding of spirituality will be grounded in spirituality's dynamics with health issues. For example, Ruth Murray and Judith Zentner assumed and defined that spirituality comes into focus at a time of illness or crisis (Murray and Zentner 1989). McBrien's later concept analysis referred to above (2006) appeared to validate this assumption when it identified "pivotal life events such as illness" as a key antecedent of spirituality, and the Cobb et al. study referred to above (2012a) appeared to formalize this by including "disease" and "illness, dying and death" as two of the nine factors in their synoptic view of spirituality. While this

interaction between spirituality and illness is no doubt *relevant* to the healthcare scenario, it is questionable whether this linkage is *essential* to spirituality, since it would suggest the absence of an impetus to spirituality in those who are well but not religious. Even within the healthcare scenario the link may not be an essential one, as some studies have failed to show such a link (see e.g., McSherry, Cash, and Ross 2004, 938).

In my view there is a need for a much wider investigation into the nature of spirituality, involving not only wider questions but also more disciplines. One of the aims of this article is to show how this can be approached by adopting a stance grounded in systems thinking. Systems thinking is a “new paradigm of thought” (Laszlo 1972; von Bertalanffy 1976) that emerged as a distinct discipline in the second half of the twentieth century. It brings together the sciences and philosophy to study phenomena not in isolation or only in terms of their parts but as wholes standing in causal relationship to both their components and their environment (Rapoport 1986). Both as a construct and as a phenomenon spirituality is so complex that, in my view, a valid understanding of its nature and implications will elude us unless we follow a multidisciplinary systems approach. Such a study will require both scientific and philosophical investigation; therefore, another aim of this article is to argue for the need to develop a “philosophy of spirituality” that can inform and support scientific research into spirituality, and in turn develop into a scientifically informed but philosophically sophisticated contributor to the philosophy of religion. While this article cannot provide such a philosophy of spirituality, it does aim to make a contribution toward its establishment.

In practical terms, this article will develop these arguments by pragmatically taking the enormous amount of scientific work done in the healthcare profession as a starting point, on the view that while it is incomplete it nevertheless provides the most *scientifically* substantive view on spirituality we have at present. The “healthcare view” will then be inspected for what appears, from a wider perspective, to be its most obvious shortcoming(s), and the “view on spirituality” widened to accommodate this extra “dimension.” This wider perspective will then be inspected for its most obvious shortcoming(s), and this process of widening and challenging will be continued until some closure is attained. In this way, a multidimensional model will emerge that can form the basis for developing a future model that is conceptually comprehensive and appropriately involves all the relevant disciplines.

I will argue that in the light of the presented model spirituality can be seen to be a coherent construct involving many factors or dimensions that can be related to each other in a systemic way, and that making this “pattern” visible not only exposes which aspects are essential to spirituality but also raises important questions about spirituality that warrant more academic attention than they presently receive.

As a first attempt at developing such a systemic view, the presented argument and model will be more exploratory than definitive, but hopefully it will serve to demonstrate not only the need for a wider and systemic approach but also the significant potential of such an undertaking to enrich science, spirituality, and religion.

BACKGROUND

In modern times people increasingly classify themselves as being spiritual but not religious (Hay and Hunt 2000; Shahabi et al. 2002; Hay 2006). This created a challenge for the healthcare sector, which is increasingly interested in the sociological and medical significance of spirituality and religion, and hence stood in need of a clear conceptual distinction between the two terms. A basic distinction between spirituality and religion, *devised for the purposes of the clinical research*, was proposed by Harold Koenig, Michael McCullough, and David Larson in the first edition of their seminal work *The Handbook of Religion and Health* (2001):

Spirituality is the personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, about meaning, and about relationship to the sacred or transcendent, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formation of community. (18)

Religion is an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols designed (a) to facilitate closeness to the sacred or transcendent (God, higher power, or ultimate truth/reality) and (b) to foster an understanding of one's relationship and responsibility to others in living together in a community. (18)

This definition of religion has held up well in healthcare research but the definition of spirituality has attracted many criticisms, underscoring the complexity of the emerging notion of spirituality in modern discourse (King and Koenig 2009, 2).

The modern academic interest in spirituality is largely focused on spirituality and religiosity's positive influence on personal health and behavior, and their positive consequences for quality of life and social welfare. This focus however creates a risk of narrowing the *meaning* of the term "spirituality" to the role it plays in health and welfare mechanisms, and stripping it of its wider meanings and wider importance. This risk emerges *now* because the differentiation between the notions of "spirituality" and "religiosity" is a modern phenomenon, so the meaning of the term "spirituality" *in academic discourse* is actually being settled in the present era. A century ago there was less sensitivity to the distinction between the referents of the terms "religiosity" and "spirituality"; for example, William James overtly conflated the two in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, saying

Religion . . . shall mean for us the feelings, acts and experiences occurring to [persons] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine. Since the relation may be either moral, physical or ritual, it is evident that out of religion in the sense we take it, theologies, philosophies and ecclesiastical organizations may secondarily grow. (James 1902[1928], 31, emphasis in original)

As this passage illustrates, James used the term “religion” (or sometimes “personal religion”) in the way we would presently use the term “spirituality,” and he used the term “religious experience” as we would now use the term “spiritual experience.” For what we would *now* call “religion” or “religious,” James used terms like “institutional religion,” “theological,” or “ecclesiastical.”

James felt he could avoid getting embroiled in “a dispute about names” (rather than definitions) (1902[1928], 30), but as people now increasingly wish to classify themselves as “spiritual” independently of their relation to “religion,” and researchers try to study spirituality independently of religious convictions, definitions of the term “spiritual” have become “fuzzy” (Zinnbauer et al. 1997), “vague and contradictory” (Egbert, Mickley, and Coeling 2004, 8), “contaminated” by mental health indicators and “tautological” (Koenig 2008, 349–350).

Concerns about the meaning-making presently under way are well motivated. First, it is acknowledged within these research fields that to “spiritual persons” their spirituality is something deeper than just an adaptive or coping function, so that the academic treatment of spirituality in such terms creates “an inherent definitional if not a procedural tension in the study of spirituality” (Miller and Thoresen 2003, 27). This tension suggests, just as Koenig would later affirm, that important aspects of spirituality, such as its underlying motives and aspirations, are being neglected in present research efforts (Koenig 2008). Second, commentators are starting to use the term “spirituality” in ways that ignore its traditional ethical aspects, so there is sometimes a slide from a concern with *acting* well to that of *living* well, and thus some argue for spirituality to be equated with the experience of cultural pleasures such as listening to music (Bunge 2010, 95–96), or even the experience of material pleasures such as luxurious living (Solomon 2006). Third, there is a tendency to gloss over important distinctions, so that spirituality is defined in ways that equate it with *having experiences* perceived as of overriding personal significance (such as signs of maturity in one’s children), or *following a practice* aimed at cultivating awareness of the sacredness of certain things (Stone 2012, 493).

I would not wish to suggest that the “nontraditional” perspectives on spirituality are without merit, but given these examples it is clear that there is a need to attend to the nuances involved in this conceptual terrain, and to develop a lexical framework that would enable us to do justice to the richness of the issues at stake and ensure that important aspects of

spirituality are neither trivialized nor lost from academic view. In this article, I will begin to develop a contribution to such a *Philosophy of Spirituality* by marking out “dimensions” relevant to the study of spirituality, and showing how this demarcation clarifies the discourse, raises new research questions, and highlights the importance of certain research directions.

DEVELOPING A SYSTEMS MODEL OF SPIRITUALITY

Current research into spirituality is notable for the diversity of researchers’ views and methods, a surplus of measures and scales (Kapusinski and Masters 2010), and a wide range of concepts used to say what spirituality is or how it can be measured (Koenig 2008). The definitions fall into a spectrum of positions emphasizing different aspects (e.g., associated feelings, experiences, behaviors, or orientations), and the scales measure spirituality in terms of a variety of research interests (e.g., mental health or social welfare). However, sufficient material is now in hand that we can start to see a pattern emerging, the components of which represent several distinct dimensions relevant to models of spirituality, which I would like to draw out in this section. These dimensions will take us beyond health care and sociology to psychology and eventually to ontology and metaphysics.

Objective Spirituality

Spiritual Welfare. Current academic interest is mostly concerned with the aspect of spirituality that is most practically evident and measurable, namely the correlates or consequences of spirituality for the person or their community. There is now considerable evidence that (self-assessed) spirituality is correlated with better mental and physical health, better coping with adversity, higher perceived quality of life, and better social welfare outcomes such as lower crime rates and lower level of substance abuse (Hill and Pargament 2003; Cook, Powell, and Sims 2009; Koenig, King, and Carson 2012). There is some evidence of indirect causation here; for example, spirituality can be linked to psychological factors that increase stress tolerance and immune responses, and to dietary and other behaviors that reduce medical risks. However it is important to recognize that there is a clear distinction between being optimistic or healthy and being spiritual (Koenig 2008). It is likely that most, if not all, of these welfare outcomes stem in structural ways from the spiritual lifestyle and not from any transcendent or mysterious aspect of spirituality (Swinton 2012, 100).

However, there is a “spirituality-relevant dimension” involved here, in the following way. Although positive personal and social welfare outcomes are not *constitutive of* spirituality, and can be brought about by other factors such as government-sponsored health care and social services, they can be

enhanced by spirituality. This is not insignificant, because for people and societies who obtain such benefits as a result of spirituality (or at least perceive this to be so), the welfare benefits will serve as an affirmation of the validity of their spirituality, and hence they can be viewed as achieving a level of “spiritual welfare” in which their spirituality is reinforced and can flourish. In this sense spiritual welfare can form a virtuous cycle with physiological and social welfare. Although spiritual welfare is not spirituality as such, it clearly can reinforce spirituality, and benefit from it. For now it is sufficient to note that “spiritual welfare” as I have characterized it is a dimension concerned with *physiological, mental, and social benefits*, and that for significant insights into the essential nature of spirituality we have to turn to other dimensions.

Spiritual Behavior. It is clear that the benefits discussed above derive from behaviors that are also readily measurable using objective methods. Spiritual people exhibit positive behavioral attitudes such as patience, tolerance, charity, community spirit, gratitude, amiability, sincerity, fairness, and so on. A link between virtuous behavior and personal and social flourishing was already suggested by Aristotle (Oppy 2012, 77), and is now well established empirically. In this light, spirituality can be argued to have evolutionary significance since it has survival value at the personal and community level. However, it would be a mistake to *define* spirituality in welfare terms, since spirituality is not dependent on welfare or survival factors, as attested by the many whose spiritual behavior persists and even intensifies under religious persecution or discrimination.

Nevertheless, I argue that this does not suggest that one should view spirituality as defined by *behavior* instead, for example, as “the aspect of humanity that refers to *the way individuals seek and express* meaning and purpose” (Puchalski et al. 2009, my emphasis) or “the feelings, thoughts, experiences, *and behaviors that arise from* a search for the sacred” (Hill et al. 2000, 66, my emphasis). Such behavioral associations are relevant to spirituality but spiritual persons typically do not consider themselves to be spiritual because they act charitably or tolerantly (for example), but rather regard themselves as acting in those ways because they are spiritual. Likewise, spiritual persons do not consider themselves to be spiritual because they follow a spiritual discipline or seek spiritual knowledge but rather practice or study because of their spiritual needs or spiritual ambitions. From this it is evident that research into “spiritual behavior” does not reveal the essential nature of spirituality, but only behavior’s role as a significant factor in the facilitation of welfare, and as an expression of motives whose source lies elsewhere. For now it is sufficient to note that “spiritual behavior,” as I have characterized it, is a dimension concerned with *attitudes and actions*, and that for a deeper insight into spirituality we have to look to other dimensions.

Spiritual Competence

Spiritual Intelligence. For spiritual behavior to be effective special capacities are required, and these have been characterized by Robert Emmons as “spiritual intelligence” in his groundbreaking book *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns* (1999). Spiritual intelligence as constructed by Emmons provides a framework for identifying and organizing the skills and abilities needed for the adaptive use of spirituality (163–177). A similar concept of spiritual intelligence was independently developed by the philosopher Dinah Zohar (Zohar and Marshall 2000). Emmons identified the core components of spiritual intelligence as including:

- the capacity to transcend the physical and material;
- the capacity to enter into higher states of consciousness;
- the ability to invest the everyday with a sense of the divine or sacred;
- the ability to use spiritual resources for problem solving; and
- the capacity be virtuous (show forgiveness, compassion, humility, gratitude, and so on).

Just like any other form of intelligence, these spiritual skills and capacities are unevenly distributed in the population, and this accounts to some degree for the uneven presence of tokens of objective spirituality in the population and in society. However, this does not yet get to the heart of spirituality, since persons are not spiritual because they have the capacity for spirituality—their spiritual intelligence has more to do with how effectively they can express their spirituality. For now it is sufficient to note that “spiritual intelligence,” as Emmons has characterized it, is a dimension concerned with *skills and know-how*, and continue on with our exploration of the dimensions relevant to a model of spirituality.

Spiritual Perception and Agency. The use of spiritual skills and know-how depends on the ability to make relevant observations (“spiritual perception”) and to take appropriate actions (“spiritual agency”). The use of observational and influential capabilities is synergetic with spiritual intelligence’s role in the *interpretation* of the observations made or the intelligent *selection and direction* of the actions taken.

There are intriguing indications that perception and agency in the service of spirituality sometimes occur in ways that are poorly understood by current science. For example, psychologists have identified a perceptual faculty they call “empathetic acuity,” characterized as the ability to accurately assess others’ emotions from nonverbal cues (Goleman 2005). These empirical findings support the assertions of the many philosophers (e.g., Husserl, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty) who have argued that people

can “directly” perceive mentalistic qualities in others (for a discussion, see Rousseau 2011a, 135–143).

Such spiritually sensitive perception has a companion in the apparent ability of some spiritual people to project beneficent influences. Long-term meditators appear to produce positive changes in people with whom they come in casual contact with (Goleman 2005; Ekman 2008), and to (unintentionally) produce positive changes in welfare indicators in their environment generally (Orme-Johnson and Oates 2009).

If they really exist, then such perceptual and influential abilities might be important contributors to spiritual competence. Nevertheless, the possession of such abilities would not be what makes one spiritual, since cases are well known of persons who can “read emotions” but are not empathetic (e.g., psychopaths), and apparently some persons can exert emotionally *negative* influences (see, e.g., Lawson 2011). Rather, “spiritual perception and agency” is a dimension to do with *observation and influence*, and contributes alongside the skills and know-how associated with spiritual intelligence to how competently one can plan and direct spiritual behavior.

By considering dimensions relevant to spirituality that can be characterized in terms of objective factors such as welfare, behavior, and competence, and finding them to be by-products of, expressions of, or adjuncts to spirituality, it has become clear that spirituality is essentially grounded in a certain kind of *point of view* or *perspective* that provides an orientation to life, context, and possibility. It is to a consideration of the source and nature of the spiritual *point of view* that I now turn.

Subjective Spirituality

Behaviors are driven by goals, needs, and beliefs. These deeply personal subjective phenomena can be thought of as characterizing “what it is like” to be a spiritual person, and hence to constitute a dimension that can be called “subjective spirituality.” Spirituality appears therefore to be, in essence, a subjectively felt orientation to encountered reality. Such a perspective on the nature of spirituality was suggested by Cobb and colleagues:

Spirituality is for many people a way of engaging with the purpose and meaning of human existence and provides a reliable perspective on their lived experience and an orientation to the world. (Cobb et al. 2012b, vii)

Orientations can be analyzed in terms of the ambitions implied by the actions they stimulate, and the beliefs and assumptions implied by the pursuit of such goals, and the subjective intuitions and experiences that might give rise to such orientations.

Spiritual Goals. The positive behavior associated with spirituality counts as *spiritual* behavior because it is motivated by “spiritual goals”

rather than social obligations, religious commitments, or intellectual conclusions based on game theory. It is the spiritual motivation behind the behavior that gives it its spiritual relevance. Research findings reveal that spiritual behavior is motivated by a particular class of ambitions, exemplified by such goals as:

- pursuing “the personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life” (Koenig et al. 2001, 18);
- the search for that which gives “a person a sense of meaning and purpose in life” (Puchalski and Romer 2000, 129);
- the quest for making connections that have “ultimate value” (Kass et al. 1991);
- “a search for the sacred” (Pargament 1997);
- seeking to fulfill “the need for achieving transcendent meaning in life” (Hill et al. 2000, 66; Hill and Pargament 2003, 65); and
- acting on our perceived “relationship to the transcendent” (Hufford 2005, 2).

These goals, needs, and motives speak to an innate yearning to find meaning and purpose in life, and an ambition to live up to such insights and understanding as one may have about one’s nature and condition. Daniel Batson calls this aspect of spirituality the “quest mode” (Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis 1993), an orientation also noted by others (Emons 1999, chap. 5; Hay and Hunt 2000, 17).

These ambitions appear to derive from the personal experience of being an innocent (uninformed) self-aware agent present in a world of choice and action. As the philosopher Thomas Nagel pointed out:

The ambition [to find a transcendent explanation of our place in the natural order] appears to be irresistible—as if we cannot legitimately proceed in life just from the point of view that we naturally occupy in the world, but must encompass ourselves in a larger world view. (Nagel 2012, 23)

This perspective is clearly a central motivator in spirituality, but it is not the fundamental one, for it does not explain why an awareness of one’s ignorance about the nature of one’s presence in the world should inspire people to seek transcendent meanings and answers rather than say just leading to depression, hedonism, relativism, or fatalism. Clearly there is even more to spirituality than what has been discussed so far, but we are getting closer. For now it is sufficient to note that “spiritual goals” as I have characterized them represent the dimension concerned with *strivings and ambitions*.

Spiritual Worldview. The exploration of spiritual goals raises a crucial question that for the first time takes us beyond the concerns of social

science and psychology: Why do (spiritual) people seek transcendent meaning in life? Why do people seek a relationship with some undefined “transcendent” reality? The straightforward answer seems to be that spiritual people have deeply held beliefs, for reasons that will be discussed, that such meanings and realities really exist. William James identified this dimension of spirituality in *Varieties*:

Were one asked to characterize [spirituality] in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen [moral] order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto. (James 1902[1928],53)

The goals that spiritual people pursue clearly imply a complex nexus of beliefs constituting what can be called a “spiritual worldview,” typically embracing such views as that:

- existence has meaning and value;
- life has an “ultimate” purpose;
- we are genuine contributors to how life’s “drama” unfolds;
- there are some absolute values (e.g., goodness, fairness, sacredness, honor, dignity, duty);
- we are responsible for our choices;
- we are responsible and accountable for our actions;
- there is “more” to us and the world than just the physical aspects;
- some situations are better than others, and should be protected or sought.

Of course not every spiritual person has all these “spiritual beliefs,” or feels them equally strongly, but to count as a spiritual person one clearly has to hold some of these beliefs to some degree. This, as James foresaw, is the heart of spirituality—it is having such beliefs that renders someone spiritual, irrespective of the extent to which these beliefs result in goals, behavior, or welfare. Spirituality clearly embraces spiritual ambitions, spiritual behaviors, and the use of spiritual resources such as spiritual knowledge and spiritual intelligence, but it is because of their grounding in spiritual beliefs that these goals, actions, and mental processes count as expressions of *spirituality*, rather than being expressions of strategic cunning, religious obligation, or cultural sophistication.

The worldview represented by the range of beliefs described can be characterized as one of “spiritual realism,” that is to say, spiritual people believe in the real existence of things like choice, freedom, norms, agency, meanings, purposes, and so on. Holding a realistic spiritual worldview in this sense appears to be an essential dimension of spirituality, representing the beliefs that ground people’s spiritual goals, attitudes, and actions.

Spiritual beliefs as outlined are interesting phenomena from a scientific perspective because they represent positions that are highly controversial in the academy, and yet are widely held within the general population. It is not an overstatement to say that according to dominant academic positions, we have no compelling evidence supporting any of these beliefs, and such evidence as we do have suggests that they are invalid. For example, prominent academics widely argue that values are wholly the product of cultural conventions (Wong 1984; Harman 2000; Wong 2009), that there is nothing “more” to us than our neurophysiology (Dennett 1991; Crick 1994; Dawkins 2006a, 2006b), and that there are no “ultimate” meanings—as Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg famously expressed it: “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless” (S. Weinberg 1993, 154).

However, most people do not subscribe to such radically devaluative views (and one may well suspect that most academics, who in fact are silent on this matter, privately agree with these more moderate positions). Surveys indicate that a very large proportion of the general population hold spiritual worldviews. In America, 97% of the general population consider themselves to be spiritual (Zinnbauer et al. 1997), while in small-scale Australian surveys of university students between 92% and 94% report that spirituality is personally important to them (Tacey 2003, 14). The beliefs on which spirituality is based are clearly not grounded in academic knowledge, but they are apparently not grounded in religious doctrines either. Figures showing religious convictions are typically much lower than for spirituality, for example, only 8.5% of the British regularly attend church (Brierley 2005) and only 20% of Americans do (Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves 1998; Barna Research 2007). This clearly begs the question of how people come by the convictions that underpin their realistic spiritual worldview.

Two answers can be suggested here, both referring to a kind of “lived experience.” The first of these is *spiritual experiences*, and the second *spiritual intuitions*.

Spiritual Experiences. A possible grounding for spiritual beliefs is that people may have had personal experiences that signify to them that such beliefs are true. This is a significant possibility, for surveys suggest that a large and growing percentage people report having had personal experiences that they consider to have spiritual significance, and this trend is independent from religious commitments. For example, in Britain, between 1985 and 2000 church attendance fell by 17% (from 10.2% to 8.5%) (Brierley 2005), while reports of spiritually significant experiences increased by 58% (from 48% to 76%) (Hay and Heald 1987; Hay and Hunt 2000).

International surveys show broadly similar results. For example, the percentage of people who report having experienced the presence of “a

spiritual power” varies between 38% (Britain), 57% (Han Chinese), 44% (Australia), and 43% (United States) (Yao and Badham 2008). This consistency is in marked contrast to religiosity, which varies widely across countries. For example, regular church attendance is much lower in Britain and Australia (respectively, 8.5% and 7.5%) (NCLS Research 2004; Brierley 2005) than in the United States (20%).

The relationship of spiritual experiences to spirituality is a complicated one. Most spiritual experiences occur spontaneously (Marshall 2005; Maxwell and Tschudin 1990), although they can also occur in response to deliberate spiritual actions such as prayer, meditation, or yoga (Braud 2008; Jantos 2012). In the former case these experiences are probably not due to personal spirituality (since they are unbidden and unexpected), and in the latter, spirituality precedes it. Clearly personal spiritual experiences can stimulate or powerfully reinforce spiritual beliefs. However, there are reasons to doubt that such experiences are fundamental to holding spiritual beliefs. First, spiritual beliefs as outlined earlier are much more complex than the content of typical spiritual experiences would suggest. An experience of having a prayer answered or sensing a sacred presence in nature hardly amounts to evidence that one’s own life has meaning, or that there are ultimate values, or that one has unconditional responsibilities. Second, the number of people who consider themselves to be spiritual very significantly exceed the number who report spiritual experiences, as reported. Finally, many people remain deeply committed to spiritual values without ever having such experiences.

Spiritual experiences are clearly valuable to the persons who have had them, but for the real foundations of spiritual beliefs we have to dig deeper, seeking something of deep personal significance and near universal prevalence.

Spiritual Intuitions. James argued in the *Varieties* that people have a “personal religion . . . more fundamental than either theology or ecclesiasticism,” that is “the primordial thing, even to those who would esteem it incomplete,” and in terms of which they “apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine” (James 1902[1928], 30–31).

In current terms we would say that (spiritual) persons have “spiritual intuitions”—innate convictions (intuitions) that, for example, life is meaningful and that existence has a purpose, even if they cannot articulate what that meaning or purpose is.

Intuitions are philosophically interesting phenomena: they represent propositions whose truth is self-evident to someone who understands the concepts involved in articulating them, requiring no further explanation. Intuitions are not always reliable, and often not universally held, but they are very real to those who have them. As Jonathan Weinberg explains:

Intuitions are intellectual happenings in which it seems to us that something is the case, without arising from our inferring it from any reasons that it is so, or our sensorily perceiving that it is so, or our having a sense of remembering that it is so. When they occur, they frequently stand out with great psychological salience, but they are not forthcoming about their own origins—envoys to our conscious deliberations from some unnamed nation of our unconscious cognition. (J. M. Weinberg 2007, 318)

Spiritual intuitions have particular force for those who have them, and they are much discussed in the philosophical literature. Here are three striking examples of what might fairly be called “spiritual intuitions”:

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence . . . the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. I do not need to search for them and merely conjecture them as though they were veiled in obscurity . . . I see them before me and connect them immediately with the consciousness of my existence. (Kant 1788[1997], 133)

Duty is to me is as real a thing as the physical world, though it is not apprehended in the same way. (Henry Sidgwick, *Letter to Major Carey* [1880], quoted in Sidgwick and Sidgwick 1906, 347)

[T]here really is, as everyone to some extent divines, a natural justice and injustice that is binding on all men, even on those who have no association or covenant with each other. (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1.13.1373b5) (Aristotle 1946, 11:34)

In these examples it is interesting to note not only the level of conviction but also the reference to nonordinary modes of perception. Such intuitions are not the preserve of moral philosophers but are very widely held among adults without philosophical training or religious commitments (Hay and Hunt 2000).

It is clear from these sources that most people have spiritually significant intuitions against which they weigh their academic knowledge, and which they regard at least as seriously. For many, these intuitions are of *overriding* significance. In this light it can be argued that spirituality involves a way of living that is conditioned by the struggle to live up to the convictions that spiritual intuitions carry.

This does not, of course, complete the picture of the nature of spirituality, for we still do not know in virtue of what people have such experiences and/or intuitions, and whether the beliefs they generate are valid or not. However, this does not undermine the important finding that as a dimension of spirituality the *spiritual worldview* is an essential one, representing the core beliefs that ground people’s spiritual goals, attitudes, and actions.

Having identified the beliefs that ground spiritual goals, it is now possible to reflect properly on the motivations behind spiritual behavior. At the outset, it was argued that spiritual behavior has certain welfare outcomes *as*

a by-product, rather than as an essential outcome. This inference carries the implication that the intention of the behavior was directed at something else, something that we are now in a position to assess.

Spiritual Growth

Gordon Allport, one of the founders of personality psychology and an early opponent of behaviorism, argued that spirituality (“mature religion” in his terms) encouraged individuals to face complex ethical problems, to be readily doubtful and self-critical, and to acknowledge incompleteness and tentativeness about answers to ultimate questions, always seeking more light and deeper insight (Allport 1950). Linking this to our analysis of spiritual beliefs we can see that spiritual actions, from a subjective perspective, are first conditioned by normative beliefs, that is, that one should behave in a certain way, and second by beliefs about spiritual potential, that is, that persons can and should strive to improve the quality of their spiritual behavior. Spiritual people not only strive to behave virtuously via direct actions such as forgiveness, sharing, and care-giving (the “spiritual behavior” that potentially has welfare as a by-product), but they also strive *to become better at being virtuous* by overtly practicing virtuous behavior such as community service, by following spiritual practices such as meditation, and by undertaking spiritual studies. It is believed that such action, practice, or study facilitates “spiritual growth,” change that broadens spiritual perceptiveness, strengthens spiritual resolve and control, increases spiritual sensitivity, and may lead to spiritual insight into the nature of existence and reality (sometimes called “enlightenment”). In this sense spiritual growth can be seen as improving what was earlier characterized as “spiritual competence.” Striving for spiritual growth in this way (by study, practice, and service) is often referred to as “being on a spiritual path,” and there is a long tradition of such practices being effective in improving spiritual competence (Krishna 1971; Murphy 1992; Hollenback 1996; Fontana 2003; Braud 2008).

Although the fruits that may follow from spiritual practices such as growth in spiritual perceptiveness, spiritual steadfastness, and spiritual insight are important, they are *outcomes* of spiritual practices rather than definitive of spirituality, and one could be spiritual without having such attainments. For now it is enough to note that “spiritual growth” is a dimension relevant to spirituality associated with *personal improvement* through practice and discipline.

The Ontology of Spirituality

In the foregoing sections, I have categorized various dimensions relevant to spirituality, and eventually traced the essence of spirituality back to

a fundamental orientation (worldview) I have characterized as *spiritual realism*, representing a set of positive beliefs, grounded largely in intuitions, such as that one has moral duties, that one's life has a purpose, and that one has real choices in pursuing life goals.

However, as mentioned before, a question hangs over whether these beliefs are true or not, and this is a separate issue from their utility in terms of welfare benefits or evolutionary advantages. The "validity question" really asks whether spiritual beliefs are true in some fundamental way—is there "something there," apart from our cultural conventions and evolutionary adaptations, that renders spirituality inherently valuable or meaningful?

This is not an easy question to assess from a scientific perspective. Although the spiritual worldview can apparently be articulated, quite simply it actually entails a range of complex *ontological commitments*, that is, things that have to be true about the inherent nature of persons or the inherent nature of the world for spiritual beliefs to be true in turn.

Specifying what these ontological commitments are is not straightforward to do, but the nature of spirituality will not be fully understood until we have analyzed what spirituality's ontological commitments amount to, and have assessed them in scientific terms. This area is under-researched and difficult, and I can present no more than a sketch here of what clarifying these matters might entail. In Table 2, I give examples on the left-hand side of the sort of beliefs that typically occur in a spiritual worldview, and on the right-hand side of the kinds of ontological suppositions such beliefs entail.

As the table makes clear, the ontological commitments of spirituality are complex and involve deep concepts that are not easily assessed from an academic point of view. However, this is an important matter, because the authenticity of spirituality hinges on at least some of these beliefs being true, in particular the existence of an objectively real world, ultimate values, moral discernment, free will, agency, will power, and an ultimate scale of values. If these "core beliefs" are all in some sense at least partially true, these facts would authenticate spiritual perspectives, making them objectively valid. However, if any of these "core beliefs" is completely false, then the authenticity of spirituality would be forfeit, because then either there is no objective outcome at stake after all, or our values are merely pragmatic adaptations or social constructions, or we are not really even partially free to choose, or we have no share in controlling our actions. Under such a scenario spirituality would be grounded in conventions and/or illusions, and have no inherent or ultimate significance.

The presently dominant views among scientists are *against* spirituality having a validating ontology, and they regard the sort of ontological commitments spiritual realism implies as at best illusory or socially constructed, and at worst delusional. For example, these academics argue that there is no real world "out there" independently of the sense we make of it (e.g., Rorty

Table 2. The ontological commitments of a spiritual worldview

Spiritual worldview	Implied ontological commitments
■ Existence has meaning and value	■ There are ultimate meanings and values
■ Life has an ultimate purpose	■ There are purposes “behind” physical reality
■ We are genuine contributors to how life’s “drama” unfolds	■ We are genuine agents ■ There is an objectively real world ■ The future is not predetermined
■ In some things, it matters what we choose to do	■ The future is not predetermined ■ There are ultimate values and meanings
■ We are responsible for our choices	■ We have free will
■ We are responsible for our actions	■ We are authentic agents
■ We are accountable for our actions	■ We have moral discernment and conscience
■ We should try to improve ourselves and the world	■ There is an ultimate scale of values ■ We and the world can change or be changed for the better
■ Our real nature transcends the physical	■ There are nonphysical substances? ■ People have souls?
■ There is a transcendental reality beyond the physical	■ The world has some supernatural aspects? ■ There are nonphysical beings?

1998, 87, 90), that values and meanings are wholly socially constructed (Wong 1984; Harman 2000; Wong 2009), that free will is an illusion (Libet et al. 1983), that there is nothing “more” to us than our physiology (Dennett 1991; Crick 1994), and that we have, as an evolutionary adaptation, evolved neurological structures that (1) direct us to have “spiritual” attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Hay 2006; Nelson 2010) and (2) produce, under the right conditions, hallucinations that are taken to be spiritual experiences (Cook and Persinger 1997; D’Aquili and Newberg 1999). On the basis of such arguments some regard spiritual convictions as delusional (e.g., Russell 1957, 107; Dawkins 2006b). It is not an overstatement to say that the dominant academic position on this subject amounts to an ontological *spiritual nihilism*.

This is a hugely important matter. If spirituality is actually grounded in conventions and/or illusions it might arguably still be *rational* to be spiritual because of its welfare value, but neither spirituality nor its welfare benefits would matter in some ultimate sense. Knowledge that this is so would perhaps not trivialize spirituality, but it would certainly render it hollow, and if such a relativism and/or fatalism were to be widely embraced it would surely put both human and planetary welfare at risk. A broad

acceptance of spiritual nihilism would carry important implications for policymaking in health care, social welfare, education, jurisprudence, and so on, with significant knock-on effects in social and cultural life, and hence for personal welfare and environmental protection. Of course if spiritual nihilism were true these consequences would not matter, because then nothing ultimately matters. However, there is a risk of spiritual nihilism being embraced prematurely, on the grounds that it is strongly implied by our best current scientific understanding. This would be tragic if spiritual nihilism should turn out to be false.

Although the deflationary views mentioned above have considerable prestige, they are by no means decisive. Doubts about the skeptical dominant positions are sharpened in the light of the ongoing failure to find viable physicalistic theories about the nature of consciousness, free will, value, meaning, creativity, intuition, and genius (Chalmers 2010; Tallis 2011; Nagel 2012), new philosophical arguments suggesting the irreducibility of fundamental intuitions to physical or cultural factors (Chalmers 2012; Nagel 2012), new evidence suggesting the irreducibility of spiritual experiences to neurological mechanisms (Holden 2009; Fenwick and Brayne 2011; Rousseau 2011b; Hufford 2012), and emerging evidence that people have innate systems of moral reasoning (Hamlin, Wynn, and Bloom 2007; Bloom 2010) and that culture modulates but does not *create* moral values (Pyysiäinen and Hauser 2010).

These alternative lines of research suggest that a nondevaluative theory about the ontology of spirituality is a plausible possibility. I will discuss these issues in more detail later on when suggesting possible avenues of future research. For now it is sufficient to note that our picture of the nature of spirituality is radically incomplete if we cannot make a judgment about *the authenticity of spirituality*. This judgment hinges on whether the spiritual worldview has a validating ontology, but for now the question of whether “the ontology of spirituality” validates spirituality remains an open one.

Spiritual Evolution

Consideration of the ontology of spirituality raises pertinent questions about the origins and ultimate potential of spirituality. Irrespective of whether or not spirituality has an authenticating basis in the nature of reality, there is still a question about how spiritual beings came to exist, and what the spiritual potential of persons or the world might be.

Scientific work suggests that life, consciousness, rationality, and spirituality originated sequentially in the history of the world, and that these new forms of existence themselves differentiate into subkinds over time. Just as we can legitimately enquire about the processes and conditions that

led to the differentiation of kinds of existence to produce entities that have vitality, sentience, and sapience, and wonder about their potential for further development in the future, so can we ask about the conditions and processes that enabled the appearance of *spiritual* beings in human evolutionary history, and wonder how these might further develop in the future.

It is for now an open question how spirituality is grounded or how it might evolve, but either way there is a dimension relevant to spirituality that is concerned with *the origins and potential of spirituality*, that we can fairly call “spiritual evolution,” the term *evolution* here describing processes that produce “new forms of existence.” In general new forms evolve by the consolidation, in group characteristics, of changes that first appear in individuals, and in this case the sorts of changes that emerge under the dimension I called “spiritual growth” earlier would seem to be relevant. For example, it has been shown that altruistic societies out-compete non-altruistic ones (Sober and Wilson 1998; D. S. Wilson and Wilson 2007). “Spiritual evolution” is therefore a companion to the dimension called “spiritual growth” above, and we can fairly group them together under a dimension called “evolutionary spirituality.”

Overview of the Dimensions Relevant to Spirituality

I have now categorized the dimensions relevant to spirituality in a structured way. From this it can be seen that the various definitions and measures of spirituality presented in the current literature differentially address distinct aspects of spirituality that are related to each other in a systemic way. For ease of reference, the dimensions of spirituality outlined above are summarized in Table 3, including examples that can serve as reminders of the phenomena or questions subsumed under each dimension.

A Systems Model of Spirituality

The factors that are the focus of each of the dimensions relevant to spirituality are clearly interdependent, but not in the linear fashion in which they emerged from the foregoing discussion. For example, spiritual behavior is influenced both by the goals deriving from spiritual ambitions and the skills provided by spiritual competence. In this light the dimensions relevant to spirituality exhibit systemic interdependencies, which can be modeled as shown in simplified form in Figure 1.

The systemic model presented in Figure 1 is consistent with Scott Richards and Allen Bergin’s hierarchical model of how a worldview underpins welfare outcomes (1997), Francis Heylighen’s cybernetic model of how worldviews drive behavior (2000), the models of cognitive personality theory as represented in the control theory of self-regulation (Carver and

Table 3. The dimensions relevant to spirituality

Level 1	Level 2	Examples
Objective spirituality	■ Spiritual welfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Benefits to physical/mental health ■ Benefits to social welfare
	■ Spiritual behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Actions that are virtuous or pro-social ■ Practices aimed at spiritual development & enquiry
Spiritual competence	■ Spiritual intelligence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ability to modulate states of consciousness ■ Capacity for virtuous behavior
	■ Spiritual perception and agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Sensory ability to perceive spiritual qualities ■ Influential ability to produce beneficent effects
Subjective spirituality	■ Spiritual goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Quest to find meaning and purpose in life ■ Need to establish relationship to transcendent reality
	■ Spiritual worldview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Assumption that there is an ultimate scale of values ■ View that we select our goals and actions
	■ Spiritual experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Experience of a sacred presence in nature ■ Experience of a transcendental providence in events
	■ Spiritual intuitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Intuition that life is meaningful ■ Sense that we have to be fair and compassionate
Evolutionary spirituality	■ Spiritual growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Enhancement of spiritual intelligence ■ Enhancement of spiritual perceptiveness
	■ Spiritual evolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Emergence of beings with spiritual concerns ■ Emergence of a world that has spiritual value?
Ontology of spirituality	■ Nature of persons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Existence of free will, agency, willpower? ■ Existence of souls?
	■ Nature of the world	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Existence of transphysical realms? ■ Existence of a nonphysical agents and ecosystem?
	■ Nature of reality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Existence of objectively real concrete reality? ■ Existence of inherent valoric aspects?

et al. 2012a, 340). Models developed prior to this tended to be narrowly focused—for example, on the sources of spiritual well-being (Lo et al. 2011), or on subjective experience (O’Connell and Skevington 2010), or on inhibiting or advancing factors (McSherry 2006)—but Cobb et al.’s (2012a) model has a much wider view, taking in, for example, personal beliefs, practices, behaviors, and practices. Nevertheless it is still focused on modeling the spirituality of patients in the context of responses to medical challenges, so Cobb et al. included disease, illness, and dying as components of the “system” that exhibits spirituality as an emergent property. This article aims to go further and develop a model that is fully comprehensive, equally valid from all disciplinary perspectives, and does not prioritize the problematique of one discipline over that of another.

WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

Given the systematic analysis of the nature of spirituality developed, it is now possible to see why defining spirituality has been so problematic, and why the definitions vary so much: spirituality can only be properly understood within the context of a system of complex dimensions which are differentially engaged at different times and in different contexts, and to which different disciplinary interests are differentially sensitive. Not only that, but spirituality is also grounded in a complex set of implicit commitments that are typically unexamined on a personal level and are academically controversial.

In the light of the analysis presented here spirituality can be viewed as essentially comprised of three life-orienting factors. First, it involves intuitions that existence has meaning, value, and purpose, and that this meaning, value, and purpose is positive in some ethical or sacral sense. Second, it involves intuitions that it matters how things are, and that we can make a difference to how things turn out. Third, it involves a yearning to achieve self-actualization by living up to this potential and promise. Tempered by an open-minded and humble acceptance of being limited in relevant knowledge and ability, it gives rise to an ambition to grow in relevant insight and capacity, to be a better person, and work toward a better world.

In terms of the systemic model developed earlier, these three factors correspond to the dimensions *spiritual intuitions*, *spiritual worldview*, and *spiritual goals*. Although what is essential to spirituality can be stated in terms of just three dimensions, these clearly cannot be understood, studied, or evaluated without taking into account the other nine dimensions with which spirituality is systemically engaged.

This definition of spirituality established here reinstates spirituality as a “personal religion” in the sense James proposed in *Varieties*, underscoring

the perspicacity of his analysis. The utility of this definition will be discussed in the next section.

However, before moving on it is worth pointing out that the understanding of spirituality that we have now arrived at confirms the claim reported in my introduction that, despite not being grounded in religion, this contemporary notion of spirituality nevertheless involves a “recognition that there is more to existence than purely the secular and the material” (McSherry and Cash 2004, 154), not least because the worldview it incorporates embraces (as discussed earlier in the section “Spiritual Worldview”) elements from a range of *generic* metaphysical views that go beyond physicalism and postmodernism; for example, realism about norms and responsibilities or even the existence of a transcendental reality. The generic commitments of spirituality so understood can readily form a base for the exploration and potential adoption of *specific* metaphysical views similar to those found in religious doctrines, for example, the real existence of souls or an after-life. In practice this does happen; for example, recent surveys reveal that around a third of British adults who are not religious believe in life after death, a similar number believe that God exists, and nearly a quarter of British atheists believe that humans have souls (Spencer and Weldin 2012). From this it is clear that there can be much common ground between the views and dispositions of those who characterize themselves as “spiritual but not religious” and those who are religious. This should not, however, be interpreted as implying that *in practice* the difference between the two groups is not significant. As I indicated in the section on my proposed systems model, spirituality has a systemic nature and a systemic context, and therefore we have to consider not only the parts of the system (e.g., normative commitments, goals, ontological tenets, and so on) but also the dynamic relationships between them, and hence the resultant processes that generate, stabilize, or change them. From a process and relationships perspective, the difference between the groups is very substantial. Simplifying for the sake of brevity, for the group that is “spiritual but not religious” their spirituality (intuitions, worldview, and goals) drives growth that *inter alia* results in the adoption of specific metaphysical commitments on a balance of intuition, knowledge, and experience. For the group that is *religious*, metaphysical commitments are dictated by religious doctrine, and therefore their worldviews and goals are necessarily conditioned by these doctrines. As such religious worldviews and goals can be, and typically are, *in tension with* intuition, experience, and scientific knowledge. These processual differences, and this tensioned relationship in the “religious system,” establish a significant contrast between the two groups. The importance of this tension goes beyond differentiation, however: responses to it may be the most significant factor behind the emergence of the category “spiritual but not religious.”

DISAMBIGUATING SPIRITUALITY FROM ITS CONFOUNDS AND
ANALOGUES

In the light of the new model and definition developed earlier, it is now possible to further disambiguate spirituality from its confounds (such as religiosity, civilized behavior, and mental health), to make a principled distinction between the spirituality of persons and the prosocial behavior of animals, and to make a principled distinction between spiritual and religious experiences.

For example, although there is no standard definition for “religious experience,” typical definitions conflate them with spiritual and mystical ones, for example by taking them to be the sort of experience that people tend to describe in terms of ideas essential to religious conceptions (Davis 1989, 29–33), or the sort of experience that one could reasonably suppose religious sentiments or convictions to have been based on (Wiebe 2004, v). In terms of the new model and definitions developed earlier we can now disambiguate these: spiritual experiences are ones that affirm spiritual intuitions (e.g., that there are absolute values) and religious experiences are ones that affirm doctrinal commitments (e.g., that we can get help in our travails by praying to Catholic Saints). In this light many religious experiences would also be spiritual ones, but this is no surprise since religious conceptions typically embrace the usual spiritual values. However, the distinction now made opens the way for there being experiences that validate spirituality without entailing confirmation of doctrinal positions, and hence for a “common ground” between different religious groups and spiritual people without religious affiliations. Moreover, recent research suggests that this “common ground” is accessible to scientific investigation in a way that might lead to new scientific insights, thus opening a way for science to explore the foundations of spirituality while maintaining an agnostic attitude toward the validity of religion-specific convictions (Jourdan 2011; Rousseau 2011a; Hufford 2012). William James foresaw something like this, in that he regarded [spiritual] experiences as having a kind of consistency from which one could “extract . . . general facts which can be defined in formulas upon which everybody may agree” (1902[1928], 433). That is, facts that can stand as objective knowledge in the scientific sense.

The new model and definition also allow us to make a principled distinction between the spirituality of persons and the prosocial behavior of animals. Nonsimian animals display behaviors that are properly interpretable as altruistic or empathetic both in the wild (Barber 1993; Masson and McCarthy 1994; Wilson 1975[2000]; De Waal 2013) and under laboratory-controlled conditions (Bartal, Decety, and Mason 2011), raising a question about the applicability of the notion of “spirituality” to this behavior. It also raises the question of whether “spirituality” might be just a grandiose term for prosocial behavior in humans, rather than

something “more.” However, as the insights developed earlier make clear, spirituality involves a consciously pursued quest to understand the nature of one’s existence in the world and an aspiration to live up to values one is consciously aware of. It is unclear whether the notions of epistemic strivings or normative aspirations can sensibly be applied to animals. While this is not absolutely excluded, we can at least now say what the qualifying conditions for spirituality are, and debate scientifically whether different forms or ways of life qualify.

A complete analysis of such conceptual distinctions is beyond the scope of this article, but these examples show that the present framework can be useful in clarifying the lexicon of spirituality research by making important distinctions explicit, and hence aid the principled investigation of spirituality in all its aspects, contexts, and relationships.

THE FUTURE OF SPIRITUALITY STUDIES

The different dimensions relevant to spirituality are, to different degrees, of interest to different academic disciplines such as healthcare, psychiatry, sociology, anthropology, behavioral psychology, motivational psychology, cognitive psychology, transpersonal psychology, axiology (the philosophy and science of values), consciousness studies, ontology (the philosophy and science of what exists), philosophy of religion, and the study of religious, spiritual and mystical experiences (RSMs). In the light of this essential multidisciplinaryity, it is important to have an integral model that can relate the contributions from the different academic sectors to each other. Only in this way can we arrive at an understanding of spirituality that does justice to its richness, complexity, and coherence, rather than treating it as a fragmented series of independent attitudes, experiences, and interests.

The dimensional systems model developed earlier provides us with a framework that not only allows us to put our existing knowledge about spirituality in order in a systematic and systemic manner but also exposes many important open questions about the nature, operation, and consequences of spirituality. These questions suggest important research directions, and place them in context. The framework developed here can thus guide an interdisciplinary research program that investigates the dimensions relevant to spirituality in a systematic and integrated way.

However, there remains scope to develop this model in more detail, and in my view there is a need for a “philosophy of spirituality” that would not only do this but also clarify the lexical framework, identify important research questions, and design projects for investigating the nature and validity of spirituality’s theoretical and empirical commitments. The dimensional framework and lexical clarifications presented can serve as a practical first step toward such a philosophy of spirituality. In the light of philosophy of spirituality’s grounding in the presented *systems model of*

spirituality, the philosophy of spirituality can be construed as a component of *systems philosophy*, which is more generally concerned with modeling the nature of ultimate reality and how that finds expression in contingent and experienced reality (Laszlo 1972; Rousseau 2014). Much valuable material is already available within the philosophy of religion and elsewhere for this new philosophy of spirituality to draw on (see e.g., Midgley 2003; Cottingham 2005), but much needs to be done to ensure it deals with spirituality as a good in itself rather than merely as a part of or bridge to religious commitments, and does not frame spirituality-relevant concepts and arguments in terms of religious commitments.

An important task of the proposed *philosophy of spirituality* would be to develop a research framework for addressing the most important but so far least studied aspect of spirituality, namely the question of authenticity. I hinted earlier at some of the conceptual issues involved and some of the lines of evidence to be followed up in this connection. I argued there that the question is very much an open one, and suggested that there are some grounds for optimism that these questions will be answered in a nondevaluative way. Delving deeper into these issues and possibilities is beyond the scope of this article, but I give a detailed exposition of this situation and outlook, and a proposal for organizing future work, in my paper “Philosophy of Spirituality: Prospects and Prospectus” (in preparation).

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