On Spirituality

Part 1: Deconstructing, grappling, and moving in the field of others

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The highest activity a human being can attain is learning for understanding, because to understand is to be free.

Baruch Spinoza, Ethics

We are staggeringly lucky to find ourselves in the spotlight. However brief our time in the sun, if we waste a second of it, or complain that it is dull or barren or boring, couldn’t this be seen as a callous insult to those unborn trillions who will never even be offered life in the first place? As many atheists have said before me, the knowledge that we have only one life should make it all the more precious. The atheist view is correspondingly life-affirming and life-enhancing, while at the same time never being tainted with self-delusion, wishful thinking, or the whimpering self-pity of those who feel that life owes them something.

Richard Dawkins, The God Delusion

The highest activity a human being can attain is learning for understanding, because to understand is to be free.

Baruch Spinoza, Ethics

The undivided, ego-free person who no longer see parts but realizes the "Itself", the spiritual form of being of man and the world, perceives the whole…there is no longer heaven or hell, this world or the other, ego or world, immanence or transcendence; rather, beyond the magic unity, the mythical complementarity, the mental division and synthesis is the perceptible whole. To this he does not need the retrospective bond (religion). It is pre-ligious; its presence is achronic, time-free, and corresponds to man’s freedom from ego.

Jean Gebser, The Ever-Present Origin

It is truly amazing what people think. And it is truly fascinating the developmental stages through which thinking and consciousness can develop [1-5]. Consciousness itself makes us aware of human subjectivity, and every attempt to construct an objective account of consciousness struggles with the problem of human subjectivity [6, 7]. Consciousness itself - coupled with our prolific imaginations - can offer us a sense of limitless, radical mental freedom and profound, universal connection: this subjective reality often points us in the direction of ideas that pertain to a transcendental, spiritual state of being that is somehow above and beyond the material world, free from all material constraints.

And some thinkers believe that categories of spirituality represent a certain peak in human cognitive and emotional development – modes of thinking and feeling that correlate with wisdom [1, 3]. Others describe spirituality as a core character strength: for example, it is listed as one amongst the set of five Strengths of Transcendence in the positive psychology classification system [8].

At the same time, not everyone thinks about or values spirituality, but this will not surprise those who think that cognitive-emotional aspects of spirituality – a sense of connectedness, universality, and fulfilment (joy and contentment) that result from personal encounters with a transcendent reality – represent a core dimension of personality along which people vary [9]. Whether or not we agree that spirituality is a dimension of human 'personality' or 'human character', most psychologists do at least agree that spirituality is difficult to understand: there is some confusion as to how best to conceptualise its psychological structure, process, and function - and this general state of confusion exists in the context of a close historical and conceptual coupling between religiosity and spirituality, a conceptual coupling that has been thrown into disarray over the past century with the rise of secular views on spirituality [10, 11].

I recently asked a group of third year students, "Do you think psychologists should study spirituality?" Some of them said, "No, spirituality cannot be observed or objectively measured – it has no place in psychological science." I wondered if this reply reflected a misunderstanding of the goals of psychological science - a curious negation of certain categories of human experience as a focus of inquiry - or simply a dislike for entertaining ideas that are in some way associated with orthodox religion. In truth, I cannot claim to have direct access to the minds of my students, and I can only speculate as to why they think the way they think. At the same time, even though the students failed to tell me what spirituality is, many students did at least consider spirituality an important focus on inquiry. Nonetheless, the dialogue thus far has been stimulating, and in two separate issues of the Irish Psychologist, I will present a set of preliminary thoughts that provide an opening for further dialogue on the theme of spirituality.

Opening

In order to understand spirituality, we must first accept that there is truth in its existence. In other words, states of consciousness and associated abstractions (i.e., ideas, values, and beliefs) that pertain to the concept "spirituality" exist in human systems - both the states and the associated abstractions are part of a living system - and one of our tasks as scientists is to understand the structure, process, and function of this living system at the individual and group level of analysis. Obviously, this is no easy task: consider the intra- and inter-individual variability in the action state that needs to be mapped [2], and consider also the great variety of conscious states and associated abstractions linked to the concept "spirituality" throughout the ages [12]. Nevertheless, in opening this dialogue, it will not help our cause to delete all the nouns, verbs, and adverbs that pertain to unobservable mental phenomena. We might develop a new language that allows us to replace the old word "spirituality" with other words, operational definitions, and theoretical formulations, but we will...
need to begin by reference to the language and conceptual structures that already exist in our culture, and there is no guarantee that other scientific sub-cultures will buy into our new approach [13, 14].

And whether or not you can empathise with the folk psychology of the lay population - that great mixture of magical, mythical, and rational ideation - spare a thought for those who wish to ‘reclaim spirituality’ from established religion, and those who wish to allow spirituality some ‘continued existence’ in culture generally [1, 3, 8]. Consider their plight: they cannot simply clear the slate, start over, and redesign themselves and their culture from scratch. They may wish to transcend various ideas, values, and beliefs that arise in their mind and that populate their world, but they may find it difficult to define themselves in relation to other ‘transcendental’, ‘spiritual’ states of consciousness and associated abstractions that already exist in a cultural field of interdependencies. As social beings, as thinkers, we all have to operate in the field of others. The category of advanced spiritual development some psychologists point to may emerge as a highly integrated, valued, autonomous state at some point during a person’s life, but the process of movement toward this autonomous state involves movement through the field of others [15].

Ultimately, we cannot first delete spirituality from culture if our goal is to understand it and perhaps express it as part of our ‘personality’ or ‘character’. The desire to delete some aspect of reality before working to understand it is, essentially, an idealised over-generalisation of Descartes’ philosophy of science. In Descartes’ method, the thinker begins by clearing the mind of everything – slowly and gradually, components are introduced, until all components necessary to describe the focus of inquiry remain. However, pragmatists have never assumed this to be a realistic starting point. For example, in Peirce’s method, the thinker must begin with the prevailing state of mind: the mass of cognition already formed, “of which you could not divest yourself if you would” [17].

And C.S. Peirce tells us something else: Although models of reality must be evaluated using formal logic, sentiment shapes the facts selected. We cannot easily divest ourselves of our sentiments, and the way in which our sentiments influence our selection of the ideas, values, and beliefs we consider ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in our culture. Having said that, we must strive to be neutral – we must work to build a neutral systems science [17, 18] – and we must therefore begin our inquiry with “what is” and with “what we possess by way of knowledge”; and not with “what should be” or with “what should be deleted or negated”.

**Sentiment and Reason and Dawkins**

When I ask Irish scientists who have read The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins, “So, what do you think,?” many of them start off by scrutinizing their face in mild distain (much like Dawkins does when talking to homeopathists) and then they usually say something like this: “I think he’s picked on an easy target – most people don’t really believe in God, they believe in belief” (Physicist), or “He’s missing the point – there is more to religion than simply believing in God: there is a positive psychological process associated with being spiritual and Dawkins says little or nothing about it” (Behavioural Scientist), or “He lacks requisite balance – his blind faith in science is no less extreme than another man’s blind faith in God” (Social Scientist), or “Study the success rate of secularist moral ideologies in the 20th century and ask yourself, honestly, what is so great about the moral alternatives to Religion, and, tell me, how can the science of evolution inform how it is we can best redesign our moral, social, political, and cultural systems?” (Political Scientist)

But Dawkins has been fighting his battle for over 20 years now, and a close reading of his book illustrates some of the logical problems associated with all these starting points and some of the different places they lead to. Consider one possible reply to each comment in turn:

1) Many people do still believe in the existence of a God, and they consider this to be a good, true, and psychologically beneficial belief - even if, in reality, the psychological costs and benefits associated with different religious and spiritual belief profiles is more complex than most people, including Dawkins, generally appreciate [19-21]. And many people believe in all sorts of other beliefs in the absence of any sound (empirical and rational) basis for their beliefs, other than their belief that a set of strong sentiments and perhaps a related set of incoherent arguments is a sound enough basis for their strong belief in their belief [22-26]. Thus, the question as to what it means to believe in belief is an open one and one can hardly conclude that it is necessarily positive. Like any other rational being, does Dawkins not have the right to challenge what he perceives as irrational?

2) Dawkins may have said very little about spirituality, and this you might consider an omission, particularly in light of the fact that religiosity and spirituality are interdependently expressed in the population [21, 27] - his focus is on religious belief and not some form of ‘spiritual consciousness’ - but if one is to mount the argument that spirituality is part of a positive psychological process, one must also be willing to consider psychological science. Thus, you must define what you mean by spirituality, measure it somehow, and examine its causes and consequences in an objective manner [9-11, 27-29]. To simply state that spirituality is a good thing, without providing a sound basis for your belief, will fail to convince the average psychologist.

3) Dawkins may have ‘faith’ in science and one might argue that the strength of his faith somehow blinds his understanding of religious faith, or makes it difficult for him to empathise with a person who believes in “nonsense”, but he claims to understand religious faith and he is able to provide a reasonable explanation for his faith in science and his lack of faith in the existence of a God. Thus, he has both sides of his argument prepared and if you are to describe his faith in science as ‘blind’, you need a more subtle argument: you need to describe, in particular, what you mean by ‘blind faith’ in this context. Ultimately, you also need to consider various different meanings of the word ‘faith’ when applied to different people in different contexts.

4) Just because you may have judged secularist moral ideologies to have somehow failed us (and here you need to specify the moral ideologies you are referring to, providing evidence of specific failures), this does not imply that religious moral ideologies have been altogether successful. Our definitions of success
and failure are critical here, and regardless of the long list of failures the advocates of both religious and secular ideologies could readily bring to the table, in simple terms, the failure of one ideological system does not imply the success of any other ideological system. The analysis of success and failure is more complex. For example, two distinct systems of belief may operate in isolation in the population, in which case they can be evaluated as more or less successful by some criteria. But two (or three or four or five) systems of belief may also co-exist, co-function and compete for prominence in the population [30-32], in which case it may be difficult to evaluate the source of generalized system failures (e.g., war, discrimination, bigotry, loss of social capital, declines in physical health and psychological well-being, and so on). More generally, the science of evolution is retrospective: it reveals principles of change and emergence at the population level [33], and although certain trajectories of future development can be predicted [34], they do not amount to anything like some idealists hope for [35].

Evolutionary science cannot, in any strict sense, inform our design of new moral, social, political, and cultural systems – evolution simply grants us a (growing) population of new brains with the potential to understand and learn from the successes and failures of the past.

None of these replies tend to satisfy my friends, because those who dislike Dawkins dislike the general weave of his thoughts. Dawkins does much more than simply challenge the existence of God. He views the God delusion as a symptom of bigger problems associated with the whole system of irrational religious ideas, values, and beliefs endemic in our culture: his inquiry challenges the very thoughts, behaviours, and group dynamics of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. (He bypasses Buddhism.) Dawkins presents a powerful psychological, socio-political, and evolutionary analysis of the ways in which the major monotheistic systems of belief influence individuals and groups, and one cannot deny that it is a very compelling account of the various negative influences.

On one level, Dawkins is simply challenging what he perceives to be the rise of magical and mythical thinking in modern culture, and his hope is to liberate the masses by pointing them in the direction of science and western enlightenment. Nonetheless, understanding formal logic, the various assumptions associated with different worldviews, and the way in which sentiments influence the construction of arguments [17, 18, 36], it is evident that Dawkins presents one inquiry amongst many, and perhaps it is the way his sentiments direct his selection of the facts that irks some of the scientists I have conversed with. But many people have not read Dawkins very carefully – others simply don’t understand his arguments – and when pushed to provide reasons for their most fundamental objections they will sometimes admit that they simply dislike what they perceive to be his “ uncaring, condescending, oppositional stance toward people with religious tendencies”. It is a case of the objective, hyper-rational, method-driven man – the evolutionary scientist, the non-psychologist – having no empathy for the subjective, sometimes irrational, method-free spiritual movement of humankind.

Test your balance
Putting aside Dawkins and the existence of God for the moment, if you truly value your beliefs - whatever they are - you need to first know what they are. Second, you need to establish some foundation for your belief, and if your belief is an important part of your identity, you need to know how to defend it, such that your foundation is strong and secure, your balance stable. If this precious thing you value so much is too easily destroyed in the context of dialogue or debate, then you might well need to question its true value. Thus, if your definition of spirituality simply involves discovering the ‘nothingness’ at the base of conscious experience, beneath the everyday ‘contents’ of consciousness, and then allowing for the existence of your subsequent ‘radical freedom’, which arises as a consequence of the various decisions you need to make to place ‘something’ in the field of ‘nothingness’ you have discovered [7, 37], then you may need to make a distinction between your definition of spirituality and the definitions presented to you by your culture - you may wish to distance yourself from the irrational and devise a meaning and a method that can withstand the test of the rational mind - you may wish to define for yourself a post-rational, philosophical, phenomenological model of spirituality that works for you. One way or the other, it makes sense to invest some cognitive effort into the construction of your belief.

You need to understand that the process of cultural evolution has produced, and will continue to produce, both adaptive and maladaptive memeplexes (systems of idea, value, and belief that have greater or less truth value and functional utility at different times, in different contexts), and you need to possess the courage to use your own understanding in the face of what culture informs you to be ‘thus’. In reality, the ‘busyness’ of things, regardless of your perspective and acquired knowledge, is something that is experienced – and your conscious experience ‘itself’ is a very concrete and real thing.

But, I hear you say, there are levels of consciousness and associated qualities of thinking, some of which are more regulated and controlled than others [3, 5, 22], and as you stand face-to-face with the reality of your culture and the reality of your

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conscious experience, you might wish to recall what Emmanuel Kant said in 1784 when asked the question, What is Enlightenment?

"Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. Sapere Aude! [dare to know] "Have courage to use your own understanding!" - that is the motto of enlightenment."

Dawkins, in pointing to maladaptive memecorrelates of religion - that is, negative behavioural and social correlates of specific religious ideas, values, and beliefs - demonstrates with ample courage that he can translate the thickness of his experience into an argument supporting the claim: Religion is dangerous nonsense. Ultimately, Dawkins believes that monotheistic religion, as it exists today, is a maladaptive byproduct of our biological and cultural evolution - it clouds our vision of "ultimate reality". However, his game of mental kung fu is not the only one - an evolutionary scientist might decide to play, and some have attempted to point to both the adaptive and the maladaptive memecorrelates of religion [38, 39].

Psychologists have similarly argued for the existence of both adaptive and maladaptive correlates of religiosity and spirituality, and one problem with the memetics analysis developed by Dawkins and others is that it fails to amount to anything close to a balanced, neutral scientific account of system dynamics [18, 40]. One core problem in this context is the failure by Dawkins to fully understand psychological science and the distinction between a substantive analysis of beliefs and a functional analysis of beliefs - that is, distinguishing the truth value of beliefs from the way in which beliefs (be they magical, mystical, or rational) function as part of the human action process in contexts multifarious.

For example, research suggests that religious rituals and taboos can promote intragroup cooperation and commute longevity [41], and some psychologists suggest that religious beliefs can bolster the group cohesion undergirding certain convoys of love and caring that accompany people over the lifespan [21]. Other researchers suggest that religion can be conducive to the development of cosmic transcendence [42] - a sense of spiritual connectedness with the universe, other living beings, past and future generations [9] - and that this broadening of awareness is often associated with potent positive emotions. For example, some have described a form of spiritual well-being, which includes a sense of connection to something beyond the individual; moments of awe and wonder; moments of transcendence; being concerned with deep values; finding some meaning in life; feeling that the universe will endure [43].

But psychological research also points to the intra-individual, inter-individual, and cultural variation that exists. For example, adults can both embrace and abandon the path of religion as they age [44], although continuity and stability of belief may be the norm [45]; the US is more religious than Europe [46], and Americans become more religious with age [47]; women embrace the religious path more often than men [48]; concepts of spirituality in the East and West differ [49]. And although studies in the US often report links between religious/spiritual beliefs and reduced onset of physical and mental illness, reduced mortality, and better recovery from or adjustment to physical and mental illness [50, 51], British samples don’t always demonstrate these same links [52]. Strength of belief may be an important factor. For example, compared to those with strong spiritual belief, Coleman et al. [53] found higher levels of depression after death of a spouse in those with low to moderate belief strength.

Psychologists also point directly to the maladaptive. One longitudinal study [54] reported religiosity buffered stress against health and financial problems, but exacerbated stress caused by marital and child problems. Researchers point to maladaptive religious coping [19], associated with beliefs about a punishing, abandoning, and absent God, and expressions of anger and discontent with Him and others. Others remind us that some non-theistic forms of spirituality, like Buddhism, do not suffer negative imagery associated with any God per se, and that one of the strategies used by Buddhists - meditation upon compassion - is potentially beneficial for one’s physical health [55, 56], as is the practice of meditation generally [57].

Dawkins is certainly entitled to his view. However, one can argue for the existence of hierarchical orders of complexity in thinking about religiosity and spirituality [58, 59] and one can sample from a huge range of functional relations when constructing models of psychological reality in this regard. For example, it is relatively easy to construct a systematic argument that focuses on the maladaptive or the adaptive correlates of religion; it is a little more difficult to construct a metasystems account that coordinates maladaptive and adaptive functional relations; and the most difficult thing of all is to construct a paradigmatic and cross-paradigmatic explanation of both religion and spirituality that draws upon all the relevant sciences – evolutionary, social, behavioural, and brain sciences – thus providing a balanced, neutral scientific account of system dynamics.

Dawkins believes that religion clouds our vision of "ultimate reality", and if you choose to think about it like Dawkins does – and if you advocate a view other than the one Dawkins presents – you need to decide what "ultimate reality" means to you, and whether or not religion and spirituality has any part to play in your "ultimate reality". And unlike those of my friends who sincerely dislike Dawkins and his worldview, I have come to a very different conclusion: a close reading of Dawkins has led me to believe that he is, in fact, a deeply spiritual man. He wants to transcend the limits of our world vision, the incredibly narrow vision of reality that evolved in:

"Middle World [a place] where the objects that mattered to our survival were neither very large nor very small; a world where things either stood still or moved slowly compared with the speed of light; and where the improbable could safely be treated as impossible. Our mental burka window is narrow because it didn’t need to be any wider in order to assist our ancestors to survive" (p. 412).

And he asks:

"Could we, by training and practice, emancipate ourselves [...] and achieve some sort of intuitive – as well as just mathematical – understanding of the very small, the very large, and the very fast? I genuinely don’t know the answer, but I am thrilled to be alive at a time when humanity is pushing against the limits of understanding. Even better, we may eventually
discover that there are no limits” (ibid, p. 420)

To move with Dawkins across and down the page is a liberating experience. It will do much for the development of your mental kung fu. Naturally, Dawkins does not see everything, and you might be disappointed if you were to follow him religiously. But this he would hardly wish for you. Embracing enlightenment, your only real choice is to read him and see if he sees what you see. Read him and decide if the intuitive understanding he hopes to achieve is the same kind of intuitive understanding you hope to achieve.

The cultural evolution of spirit
and the decision to fight with
mammy over memes

One only needs be minimally connected with history to know that our ancestors lived in a world occupied with spirits and Gods [60]. Jean Gebser argues that awareness of our past ‘magical’ and ‘mythical’ belief systems – those mental structures associated with the slow development of consciousness – can help us to better understand modern spiritual consciousness. Stated another way, an understanding of evolution, biological and cultural, can serve to deepen our understanding of the spiritual dimensions of existence.

When Gebser talks about spiritual consciousness, part of what he is referring to is a quality of experience that allows us to penetrate reality and perceive ultimate reality with greater clarity. Thanks to the extraordinary power of the scientific method, we are beginning to learn something of what lies beneath entities such as the cosmos, matter, life, and mind. In this process, we have been forced to transcend appearances and penetrate reality with an increasing intensity of awareness and computational power.

Prior to the birth of scientific thinking (and the ability to represent the relation between self and other by reference to an ‘objective’ theory), historical artefacts suggest that human consciousness was undifferentiated. During the magical period [60], self and other were experienced as one-and-the-same (i.e., consciousness was one-dimensional), much like infants experience the world prior to developing the ability to reliably conceptualise the distinction between self and other [61]. In this undifferentiated state, the “religious” experience is that magical sense of “world alive”. This undifferentiated sense of aliveness is projected into the inanimate as well as the animate world.

Later, with the development of language as a form of communication, self and other were differentiated, and a narrative, non-scientific account was constructed outlining the “reasons” why the world is alive. In this mythical era, Gods and spirits are named, creation myths are passed from generation to generation. Here, consciousness can be described as two-dimensional (2D).

With the birth of science, reasoning became grounded in observation and description of functional relations in the concrete world. The world of spirits and Gods started to crumble – but it never fell apart completely. Logos sought to replace mythos: imagination and feeling had no place in the new world order, intuition and subjectivity had to be replaced by rationality, objectivity, and systematic thinking. Nevertheless, without a sound theory describing the birth of the universe, life, and humanity, the creationist myth lived on in a happy dualism that separated the world of mind and spirit from the concrete world. This dualism was maintained throughout the middle ages, when scientific progress was suppressed in favour of maintaining social order and control, the religious status quo [62]. As such, hypothetico-deductive reasoning (where ‘theories’ are constructed as a means of understanding the relation between self and other - a product of 3D consciousness) was established in a divinely-given, intelligently-designed world. The creation myth was retained. Spirits were retained.

Therefore, 3D consciousness never fully escaped 2D dualism or the allure of mythos. (Notably, part of Gebser analysis points to the idea that an advanced spiritual consciousness does not seek to ‘escape from’ but to ‘make integral’ and ‘advance upon’ earlier consciousness structures[63]; see also Part II).

It was only with the slow expansion of scientific analysis and synthesis that the physical, chemical, biological, psychological, and social levels of analysis gravitated toward greater integration. The long established dualism separating the immaterial from the material was challenged from the Renaissance on. But it was not until the middle of the 19th century that established religion (in the western world) was forced to face its ultimate challenger: evolution [63]. For many, Darwin’s theory of biological evolution disestablished the belief that humans are divine creations. Some scientists found this difficult to stomach and settled upon agnosticism.

At the same time, the science of evolution was slow to speculate about the functional (i.e., adaptive) significance of the development of religion, and most scientists had relatively simple-minded views on the subject. At the same time, long before Richard Dawkins coined the term ‘meme’ [64], describing it as "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation" (p .206), many post-Renaissance thinkers had challenged religious meme systems, or memeplexes, as anti-scientific. Dawkins himself used the ‘meme’ construct to explain how religions acted as self-perpetuating idealational complexes that have hoodwinked us into spreading their message. In this view, the western science enlightenment meme ‘have courage to exercise rational enquiry’ competes with the western religion faith meme ‘have faith in the absence of evidence’. But the subsequent evolutionary school of thought generated by Dawkins thinking, Memetics, was later criticised as non-scientific evolutionary story-telling and, worse, fundamentally flawed tautological thinking [40]. Few evolutionary scientists now advocate any simple-minded gene-eye or meme-eye view regarding what is and what is not functional in the dynamic set of relations between human belief, human action, and the evolution of the species [39]. And in the context of modern evolutionary science, many of the problems associated with understanding the functional significance of ideas, values, and beliefs are now understood to be problems for psychological science.

In reality, many different evolutionary stories about the development of religion and its functional significance can be generated, but most of us find it difficult to see clearly in this narrative field because the science of cultural evolution itself is poorly developed [40]. Some argue that the idea of an “afterlife” is culturally recurrent, proximally driven by emotions, often implicated in social and reproductive matters, and ostensibly fitted to the ecological niche in which humans developed [26]. Others suggest that spirituality has become implicated
in survival of the species via the relations between spirituality, sociality, morality, and meaning-making [39, 65]. To a certain extent, all the stories generated thus far are simple-minded, even those that sound plausible.

**Stories, stories**

Ensuring human survival is dependent not only on the ability of individuals to reproduce but on the success of their children to reproduce. As the saying goes, biology flows downhill: parents strive to ensure that conditions are optimal for their children. And because evolution along the human lineage saw an ever-increasing period of dependency before the developing person reached their reproductive prime, social emotions associated with care duties became increasingly important. Also, because human beings evolved in a tribal context, where care duties were distributed within a large social circle, reproductive success necessitated increasingly organised networks of social support, moral systems of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, and principles of social reward and punishment [39, 66].

Following this logic, Bering speculates that evolution of the idea that absent agents can perceive our behaviour and reward or punish us as a consequence of our behaviour may have been critical for the evolution of both altruism and inhibitory control [26], and, by extension, everyday punishments dished out by authorities to individuals ‘for the good of the people’ [67] may have become linked with systems of belief about ‘spiritual authorities’ who proscribed certain behaviours as a matter of principle [26].

Cacioppo and colleagues [65] see similar, associated functional relations. They propose that many of the positive correlates of spirituality - kindness, empathy, compassion, mercy, trust, justice, love, friendship, hope, and so on - emerged in parallel with the human instinct for sociality and meaning-making. For example, the basic motivation referred to above ‘care for the next generation’ – *generativity* in Erik Erikson’s scheme [68] – became increasingly generalised and differentiated, and those who mastered the art of altruism and generativity had more offspring who survived to rear children. And a broader social sensibility, including a sense of connection with one’s ancestors and a sense of responsibility for the care of one’s ancestors, implied that worldly sociality and certain categories of other-world spirituality were fused in our cultural evolution.

And then there is the idea that religion somehow co-opted our predisposition for meaning-making. For certain, many developmental psychologists argue that adult development is not simply about survival, reproduction, and maintenance of control over the environment, but also meaningful and purposeful existence [20, 27, 69-75]. Meaning and purpose in life is often described in narrative terms by reference to a connection between the person and the social and spiritual world [8, 76-79], and theories that define successful human development in terms of an individual’s efficient and effective doing – mastery over action and the human environment [80] - often fail to address *being and purpose* in any meaningful way. But if we assume that a culturally-given set of ideas, beliefs, and values can somehow offer the developing person both increased control over action and the human environment *and* a sense of coherence or meaning and purpose, then there is no reason to assume that meaning-making cannot be integrated into a more complex evolutionary account of human system functioning [81], and we can readily speculate about the function of religion in this regard.

Evolutionary thinkers often note that our motivations and emotions evolved in the context of efforts to adapt to group living, not simply as a result of efforts to survive and reproduce in an unstable environment. This social context implied a delicate balance be maintained between cooperation and competition – between ‘getting along’ and ‘getting ahead’ [82]. As religions evolved, they provided a set of beliefs and behavioural practices that facilitated getting along and getting ahead, which in turn helped regulate the smooth social functioning necessary for adaptation to (and control over) the environment. In the course of providing the motivational, emotional, cognitive and behavioural glue that facilitated adaptation to the physical environment and the social world, these belief systems also attempted to explain the relation between the physical environment, the lived social world, and the spirit world. In this sense, meaning-making became an implicit and explicit function of religion. As a whole, then, religion became the unifying meme that established meaning and purpose in people’s lives. And even today, although orthodox religious faith has declined in the western world, the search for meaning and spiritual connection is still common [83].

**The good, the bad, and the ugly: on the story goes**

Religion is a part of culture. Culture is a part of biology, and how culture is acquired, used, and transmitted is a function of universal features of human action, which, for example, makes some people more likely to be imitated, some moral values more appealing than others, some ideas more difficult to learn, some cultures more readily sustainable [39]. In the context of western enlightenment, some aspects of the spirituality meme that were attached to established systems of religious belief and practice were weakened through cultural selection [62], but not all aspects. If all aspects of the spirituality meme were to weaken in line with enlightenment-related weakening of belief in God (at the population level, in Europe), then one might expect scientists to discard the term “spirituality”, but they do not. Scientists continue to state that spirituality is a central feature of our personality, our character, our progressive development toward wisdom [3, 8, 9, 27, 65]. Why this evolving dissociation of religion and spirituality? Perhaps, as theories of cultural evolution imply, it is the beneficial correlates of the spirituality meme – the positive memecorrelates – that are likely to be retained by culture, whereas the non-beneficial correlates – the negative memecorrelates – are likely to be dropped.

During the process of cultural evolution, much of what earlier periods in history accepted as functional – creation myths, the God-given nature of specific moral beliefs and social practices, and so on – was increasingly challenged. At the same time, many culturally-accepted definitions of “being spiritual” remained, were desirable, and, in the era of evolutionary science, were still open to cultural selection because of their relationship with successful development: pro-social behavioural tendencies, quality social support networks, strategies for coping with loss, strategies for healthy living, intrapersonal and interpersonal coherence, meaning
and purpose, transcendent conscious experiences, and so on. Culture, folk psychology, and mainstream scientific psychology continues to inform the developing person of the adaptive and maladaptive correlates of "being spiritual", and cultural evolution continues to act upon these belief systems.

And if we embrace a relatively simple-minded view of cultural evolution for a moment and seek to understand the relationship between these positive spirituality memecorrelates and lifespan development, then, advancing upon the argument by Cacioppo and colleagues, we can speculate that there are two life periods when the positive memecorrelates of spirituality will tend to have their greatest impact: early childhood and old-old age (see Figure 1). During early and late life periods people have fewer biological and psychological resources, and they generally have less control over how material, social, and cultural resources are distributed - they are thus more dependent [84]. Therefore, if positive memecorrelates of spirituality are manifest in the population, for example, interpersonal strengths of kindness, empathy, compassion, mercy, trust, justice, love, and friendship, those people who have internalised the corresponding memeplexes may be more likely to behave in ways that benefit people most in need of quality social support [85-87], and this behaviour pattern will be reinforced by those who wish to maintain social order [67]. As part of a broader social-cultural exchange process, the collective resources of the population will presumably be bolstered and the spirituality meme will thus be reinforced at the population level [41, 88, 89]. At the same time, a spirituality memeplex with positive interpersonal memecorrelates may have to compete with another memeplex that deactivates positive interpersonal strengths and invokes less social support. For example, some commentators argue that the memeplex "aggressive capitalism" acts to extinguish many of the behaviours described as interpersonal strengths above [90] – and when aggressive capitalism dominates our social force fields, the weakest suffer first whenever there is a recession; priority given to maximizing returns distorts the socially identified needs of younger and older people; the commodification of labour breaks families apart; the sentiment amongst the cynics becomes that of 'older people are a selfish welfare generation'; and so on. However, the spirituality memeplex might gain in prominence in strength as a consequence, because it comes to be increasingly valued 'in relation to' an increasingly toxic and devalued competitor (the "aggressive capitalism" memeplex).

And if we continue to put this positive psychology spin on our theory of cultural evolution, we might argue that the greater the degree of positive correlation between any given spirituality memeplex and (1) positive states of being, (2) socially adaptive strengths of character, and (3) socially supportive institutions, the more likely it is that the memeplex will be reinforced within the population through cultural selection. Conversely, those correlates of the spirituality meme that are deemed irrational or somehow non-functional in the modern world will tend to be weakened, deselected, perhaps slowly at first, until, as Dawkins says, a 'critical mass' of thinkers is able to clearly distinguish

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**Figure 1: The relationship between positive spirituality memecorrelates and collective lifespan resources**

- **Positive Personal Action** that promotes well-being: Meditation; Health behaviours; sense of coherence; etc.
- **Positive Interpersonal Integrity**, kindness, fairness, forgiveness, modesty, self-regulation, gratitude, hope; etc.
- **Positive extrapersonal** Building socially supportive institutions for future generations

- **Collective lifespan resources**: biological, psychological, social, and cultural

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the rational from the irrational in their system of beliefs (see Figure 1).

We cannot deny that there are many forces at play shaping the co-evolution of our genes and our culture [91], and, similarly, we cannot deny that there are many forces at play in shaping our lifespan development [92], but if culture supports positive health behaviours, time for meditation, a sense of coherence, meaning and purpose, mindfulness and acceptance in the face of unavoidable pain, and so on, then this is good. If culture supports integrity, kindness, fairness, forgiveness, modesty, self-regulation, gratitude, hope, and so on, then this is good. If culture has built (or is in the process of building) socially supportive institutions for future generations of all ages, then this is good. To the extent that spirituality bolsters these positive tendencies on a population-wide level, then spirituality is good. Naturally, a memeplex other than a spirituality memesplex can produce similar (if not identical) positive effects. For example, understanding why specific behaviours are beneficial may provide sufficient reason for people to select them. In other words, scientific accounts of human action can provide a scaffold upon which principles of behavioural control are pursued [93-95].

Many schools of thought in psychology carry some form of "humanitarian science" meme. For example, the positive psychology movement seeks to develop a scientific account of how positive emotions, character strengths, and supportive social institutions can benefit the developing person [8, 35, 96-99], with the ultimate objective of promoting these same positive outcomes in culture. This account need not invoke any religious or spiritual principles, even if the scientific movement itself does work to study the potential benefits of religion and spirituality.

A central question is whether or not a population working with a "humanitarian science" meme can produce relevant "beneficial effects" (e.g., promoting meditation) with the same level of efficiency and efficacy as do populations working with simpler "human spirituality" memes. This is an empirical question, and not one that we can answer directly here, as it involves comparing the efficiency and efficacy of cultural influences within different sub-cultures where science and spirituality are clearly differentiated. When it comes to understanding optimal human development, although individuals will naturally select actions from the full range of what culture offers [80, 100], this does not detract from the importance of culture per se. Culture sets up many systems of contingencies that shape human action. People from different cultures entering a common environment carry different behavioural norms [101] and while substantial individual variation in core personality traits and intelligence is genetic, little behavioural variation among groups is genetic.

Importantly, people will imitate the ideas, values, and beliefs that are most common and most successful in their culture, and for those who can flexibly shift from the strategy 'imitate' to the strategy 'learn', imitation raises average fitness of populations by allowing learned improvements to accumulate from one generation to the next [31]. Spirituality memes are omnipresent in modern culture, and it has been argued that certain memecorrelates of spirituality - sociality, morality, meaning-making - are associated with successful development [65]. As the children and adults of modern culture develop, they will continue to assimilate and modify the ideas, values, and beliefs of culture. And although massively varied in modern culture, the memecorrelates of spirituality will continue to change as history marches forward.

But how should we - you and I - conceive of spirituality? Quality thinking is beneficial if correct. Certain categories of spiritual experience - a sense of connectedness, universality, and fulfillment (joy and contentment) that result from personal encounters with a transcendent reality - are neither correct nor incorrect when considered as pure phenomenological experiences; they are, however, more or less functional when they co-operate with higher level problem-solving and decision-making mechanisms that coalesce in the unfolding of action sequences. Naturally, one can experience spiritual well-being - joy, awe, and unity - in the realm of pure phenomenology, and positive emotions granted by way of this experience may be very beneficial in many ways [102], but this spiritual well-being does not imply quality coping, problem-solving, or decision-making skills in all situations [103]. As we learn to respond to an increasingly complex set of contingencies, the original spirituality we first conceived of will invariably change, adapt, or perish. And some thinkers prime us to the challenge: they believe that successful ageing involves moving toward greater levels of integrated complexity [104], where emotion and cognition work well together in contexts increasingly multifarious.

In the closing sections of his book, The God Delusion, Dawkins hopes that we will "emancipate ourselves" and achieve an intuitive and mathematical understanding of the very small, the very large, and the very fast. He sees humanity as pushing against the limits of understanding and he hopes eventually to discover that there are no limits. But, surprisingly, Dawkins says little about the psychological, functional significance of arriving at this state of understanding: it is unclear what he considers will be the effect on human consciousness, human behaviour, and human social functioning. Understanding the very small, the very large, and the very fast is one thing; understanding human conscious experience, human behaviour, and human social functioning is another thing. We will pursue this further in part II of our inquiry on spirituality.

(Endnotes)

i Other strengths of transcendence include appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, and humour. The complete character strengths classification system includes 24 character strengths, 5 strengths of knowledge (creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love or learning, and perspective), 4 strengths of courage (bravery, persistence, integrity, and vitality), 3 strengths of humanity (love, kindness, and social intelligence), 3 strengths of justice (citizenship, fairness, and leadership), and 4 strengths of temperance (forgiveness and mercy, humility and modesty, prudence, and self-regulation). See also paper II.

ii "Indeed, there is something to be said for treating these not as religions at all but as ethical systems or philosophies of life" (p. 59).

iii Gebser considers a 4D consciousness structure to be the hallmark of modern spirituality. 4D consciousness is aware of, accepts, and utilizes the latent power in the magical (1D), mythic (2D), and mental (3D) consciousness structures, but it cannot be systematized by 3D consciousness, which is rational and bound by space and time in its form of representation. 4D consciousness is aperspectival, arational, integral, open and free, present, concretizing, ego-free, transparent, and rendering diaphanous the world perceived and imparted in truth. In some ways, the path and the outcome described by Gebser is not unlike that described in the Zen Ox pictures (see Part II).

iv Notably, even science, which disavows much of the established meaning and
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WE NEED YOUR VIEWS!

PSI Strategic Plan: Consultation Process

The Working Group on Strategic Planning was formed last year to develop a three-year Strategic Plan for the Society, with a view to maximising the potential of the Society. The plan will include the setting of both short and long-term goals in relation to:

- The recruitment and retention of membership;
- The recruitment and retention of staff;
- The delivery of services to both members and the public.

The Working Group will be conducting a consultation process in February and March. The aim of the consultation process is to gather views and opinions from groups and individuals internally, and external to PSI, to inform the development of the strategic plan. We would encourage as many people as possible to engage with the process and provide input to the development of the Strategic Plan.

Survey of Members and Non-members

A survey, designed to obtain members’ and non-members’ views of the Society will be available from the PSI website www.psihq.ie in the coming weeks. We invite all members to complete the survey and to pass it on to colleagues for their consideration.

Interviews and focus groups

In order to further explore the issues relevant to the development of the Strategic Plan, interviews and focus groups will also be conducted with key stakeholders. If you would like to participate in this aspect of the data gathering process, please contact us via the email below.

It is anticipated that the draft plan will be available for presentation and discussion at the Society’s AGM in May. If you have any comments or queries regarding the Strategic Plan or would like to express your views on the future of the Society please send them to strategy@psihq.ie

We look forward to hearing the views of members and other key stakeholders regarding the future development of PSI.

Dr. Suzanne Guerin
On behalf of the PSI Working Group on Strategic Planning

email strategy@psihq.ie