

Finally: what is *spiritual* about spirituality? What gives this state its special status, so often associated with religiosity?

### *The special status of the "spiritual"*

The first step is always to succeed in becoming surprised—to notice that there is something funny going on; and in this case, clearly there is. Here is the puzzling question. If a mystic, poet, or prophet sits in Wordsworthian repose on a hillside over a river and loses himself in a sustained low-focus reverie—in a thought-stream animated by the affect link, "gently led on" by his emotions—we have seen clearly why he might experience a sensation of the underlying connectedness of things. But what does that have to do with *God*? Why does a perceived tie among all worldly things lead so many thinkers to thoughts of a (by definition) *other*-worldly Being? Why does Rolland (in Freud's account) insist that the "oceanic" feeling he and other spiritual-minded people experience "is the source of religious energy which is siezed upon by the various Churches and religious systems" (Freud 1930/1961, 11)? Why does Coleridge report, after a period of contemplation in which his being is "blended in one thought," that "when I rose, I found myself in prayer" (*To William Wordsworth*: 109; 112)? What's to pray about? What brings this sort of thing on?

This is not a question about theology! It is the sort of cognitive question that any serious account of human thought must confront.

You might answer that anyone decently versed in religious doctrine is aware of the claim, common to many religious views, that God created everything, and that (in some variants) he imbues or animates or is immanent in everything. And you might claim accordingly that the sensation of connectedness reminds the thinker of a particular doctrine learnt in Sunday school. But this explanation misses the point. In the literature of religious spirituality and mysticism, the "sensation of connectedness" gives rise to *sensations* of the presence or immanence of something identified as

"God." The powerful ties between this particular cognitive state and the idea of God derive from the state's propensity to produce a particular *sensation*, not merely to remind the thinker of an article of dogma; to produce, in Wordsworth's poetry, "a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused . . ." (*Tintern Abbey*: 95–96.) Why should this sensation be one possible outcome of sustained low-focus thought?

Recall my earlier claim that an emotion is a *content-transcending abstraction* of a thought. The same claim might be rephrased: an emotion can be a *meaning-transcending abstraction*, where the "meaning" of a memory is simply its contents. The meaning of memory *A* might be "listening to Schwartz refute Piffel's argument," of memory *B* "watching my son demolish a five-foot-high tower of blocks." If these two scenes gave rise to the same emotion—the same nameless, subtle, probably fleeting feeling—then emotion transcends meaning.

We can say, then, that *the experience of sustained low-focus thought produces the sensation of transcending meaning*. Just as riding a roller coaster gives you the sensation of weightlessness (let's say), of gravity transcended, sustained low-focus thought gives you the sensation of meaning transcended: you move from thought to thought, sensing that each thought is related to the previous one—and yet their *meanings* are not related. Hence the sensation of meaning *transcended*, of moving forward in a plane separate from the plane of explicit meaning; the sense of (you might say) *defying* meaning, as an amusement-park ride might give you the sensation of defying gravity. Meaning impels ordinary thought trains, but not low-focus ones.

Now, the mature religious imagination gives a name to "the sensation of transcending meaning." That name is "the experience of God," or "the sensation of the presence of God." The name might or might not make sense to you; whether it does or not is irrelevant. The fact remains that *this name* is associated with *that sensation*, and sustained low-focus thought produces *that sensation*, and hence, if you are sufficiently familiar with religious tradition, the term "God" naturally enters the picture. (The "experience of God" is a different topic, of course, from the attributes of God—from the way one conceives God in substance. When a religion gets down to serious moral and cultic business, it must say what God is



like, not merely what “the experience of God” *feels* like. The *experience* has nothing to do with what one imagines God’s “personality” to be. On the other hand, you can be a learned theologian and never have experienced “the sensation of God’s presence” that is so important a part of mystical traditions across a wide spectrum of religious communities.)

In short, sustained low-focus thought produces the sensation of *underlying unity*, and the name “spiritual” is associated with exactly that sensation, and hence we can account for *spiritual* states of mind by positing the mechanism of *low-focus thought*. Further, sustained low-focus thought produces the sensation of *transcending meaning*, and the name “experience of God” is associated with exactly *that* sensation, and hence we can account for “experience of God” states of mind by positing the mechanism of *low-focus thought*.

I will close with a short excursus. My assertion that “experience of God” is a name for “the sensation of meaning transcended” might be mystifying. Here is an explanation, for those who care. This is off the topic, but it’s brief.

The “God hypothesis” as it has emerged in the mature religious imagination is the hypothesis that there is some transcendent entity. It follows that whatever you might assert about such an entity is wrong, or at best incomplete: *ex hypothesi* the thing being described is immune to human comprehension; you *can’t possibly* grasp the whole story. “Any attempt to give it a definite, positive content in ordinary language is bound to fail because ordinary language can deal only with ordinary life, while the transcendent is precisely what stands out of the ordinary.” (Dupré 1972, 16.) Except that, of course, I’m not saying merely that you can’t *adequately describe* this “God idea” in language; rather that, by definition, you can’t even *conceive* it. (This claim is in a sense the exact inverse of the famous old “ontological argument” for the existence of God . . .) Kant says this, in William James’s (1902, 55) paraphrase: “We have the strange phenomenon, as Kant assures us, of a mind believing with all its strength in the real presence of a set of things of no one of which it can form any notion whatsoever.” James himself regards this Kantian pronouncement as “particularly uncouth.” Uncouth or not, it is exactly right. It jibes with some of the most interesting

facts on record about the nature of "religious" experience. Thus, Gershom Scholem (the century's greatest student of mysticism) comments on a curious tendency in Jewish mysticism to associate the experience of God with an experience of *nothingness* (Scholem 1961, 5).

Hence, the name "experience of God" is associated with the experience of being "beyond meaning." To escape from the limits of whatever humans can conceive, to enter some kind of state in which the mind dwells on no concept whatever—that is the essence of what is historically identified as the religious experience. Music has always been associated with religious experience. Music, particularly pure melody or a chant with meaningless syllables or unnoticed words, produces the sensation of transcending meaning by inducing a sensation of *many* meanings. Music induces a series of emotions and each emotion in the series may induce in turn, via affect link, a kaleidoscope of recollections. Low-focus thought accomplishes the same thing directly.

Sustained low-focus thought is the music of cognition.

## Out of control

"Our greatest blessings come to us by way of madness," writes Plato in the *Phaedrus*—"provided the madness is given us by divine gift." (See Dodds 1951, 64.) Folk psychologists have always been fascinated by phenomena that seemingly "take us out of ourselves." Such phenomena are associated with creativity, but also in their more vivid and sustained forms with spirituality and divinity, with Rolland's "oceanic" feeling, Nietzsche's "complete oneness with the essence of the universe" (Nietzsche 1872/1956, 25). Wordsworth's "sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused," and Coleridge's "sense of wonder." I have cited Dodds' comment about inspirations and creative insights hitting a person suddenly, out of the blue; "but in that case," Dodds (1951, 11) inquires respecting the insights of Mister Newly Inspired, "... how can he call them 'his'? A moment ago they were not in his mind; now they are there. Something has put them there, and that something is other than himself". Inevitably, theological speculations follow. Modern accounts leave out the religion, but on the whole

they are no less mysterious. If we bypass the "analytic" faculties and invoke "the emotional, involved, holistic right brain" (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986, 65), are we any farther along? I have now accounted for exactly this sort of intrusion or inspiration in terms of a clear, well-defined and fairly simple cognitive mechanism, the affect link at low focus.

*And yet.* The spiritual mind-state is denigrated in modern intellectual life. Freud's approach is still representative: he "professed an interest in analyzing that feeling but he did not really respect it" (Gay 1987, 17). Is my insistence on accounting for the spiritual within an integrated mind-model one more piece (and a particularly brazen one) of superior psychologizing? One more patronizing attempt to explain religious and spiritual phenomena out of existence? I think not. Because I can assert—the spectrum model allows me to assert—that the spiritual state of minds is in fact *truth revealing*. It produces not merely a certain something-or-other feeling but *fresh knowledge*, although not necessarily of a sort that can be communicated. The "connectedness" of which spiritualists speak is exactly the same stuff out of which discoveries of the structure of benzene are made. It is real connectedness. Not every affect link reveals a fact of scientific value, or of any practical value, but every affect link reveals a truth. That truth is that your emotional faculty, ultimately (as I will discuss) just your body, succeeded in extracting the same essence out of two separate types of raw material. So those two types of material are somehow related. As surely as a Geiger counter is a mechanism for detecting radioactivity, the mind in a spiritual state is a mechanism for detecting real but hidden connections. Or should I say, for divining them . . . ?

## Sleep, childhood, antiquity

The passages that lead from awakesness to sleep, from childhood to adulthood, and from prehistoric, precultural man to a full-fledged modern specimen represent the Big Three cognitive transitions.

It has long been understood that there are connections of some sort among the conditions of sleep, childhood, and antiquity.

Freud believed that the three are related in a variety of ways. Dreams are (in his famous term) the royal road to the unconscious,