
LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Whether “spirituality” can be a meaningful concept is still open to question

I am glad that in the editorial “Spirituality: The Psyche or the Soul?” you confirm my previously published criticism of the all-embracing concept of “spirituality,” and I also appreciate that you attend to the challenging task of finding a more reliable and valid definition of the concept (Salander, 2006; Wein, 2014). As you show in your editorial, the concept has become a hodgepodge of different ideas, and a more precise definition in a systemic context is urgently required. I do also think you have initiated the discussion with the correct means, that is, focusing on an empirical phenomenon (instead of a Platonian discussion of ideas) to see whether there is a corresponding vacant conceptual space. Unfortunately, however, I cannot see in what sense your “new definition” is helpful. To state it concisely: I still cannot see the vacant conceptual space suitable for the “spirituality” box. As far as I can see, the space you refer to is already occupied.

Your proposition for a definition is that secular “spirituality” is constituted by an experience of *unification* accompanied by a change in the *state of consciousness*. Here are my comments with regard to this proposition:

Concerning unification, you refer to Freud and his reflection on an “oceanic feeling” (notice, however, that it is you, not Freud, who has chosen to connect this feeling to “spirituality”), and you add other examples of an altered state of consciousness such as “meditation, concerts, sporting events, love, or a profound cognitive insight,” or, by all means, drug experiences. I do think I understand what you are hinting at. Let me present two illustrative examples:

1. Some years ago, I was skiing trackless in the very dark night in the mountains together with a couple of friends. It was quite silent, and by the light of the full moon we found our way down to the valley. It was an extraordinary experience I will never forget—it was an “intense and focused, and less distractible awareness,” using your words.

2. Writing this letter to you touches upon the same dimensions. I’m intensively focused on the task. Time just passes by, and I forget to have my dinner at the ordinary time. I’m cognitively focused and can hardly be distracted. I’m unified with my task. The surrounding is just background.

These experiences, if I understand you correctly, might both be called spiritual experiences, even though the latter is far less intense. In order to strengthen your proposition, you state that the spiritual experience is *qualitatively* different from regular awareness but also *distinct* from an emotion. I do think this is a problematic position.

I’m not acquainted with your definition of an emotion, but relying on the well-established psychological theory credited to Silvan Tomkins (who in turn relies on Darwin), emotions are what happen to us when memories are triggered by, and fused with, affects. Affects are the biologically inherited different ways that homo sapiens react to the external world (Nathanson, 1994). Our *emotions* are thus made up of the (nine) affects in different combinations, and the special quality we experience is produced by the associated memories. I do not think it is a good idea to propose something outside of emotions.

In my mind, my very special and unforgettable ski experience is a combination of, first of all, the affects *excitement* and *enjoyment* within a special context giving it its special quality, that is, with friends skiing in the night accompanied by the full moon. In the writing of this letter, excitement and enjoyment within that special context has produced a similar but nonetheless different experience. The same applies to the experience of “concerts, sporting events, love, or a profound cognitive insight.” You are in a state of “flow,” and what surrounds you matters less (figure-ground in gestalt psychology). This is indeed a very *emotional* experience. We thus already have words from psychology to describe these experiences.

Paving the way for “spirituality” by proposing that the experience of unification in a state of altered consciousness is what is meant by “spirituality” is thus hardly a solution for the stretched concept. Affect psychology has already provided us with a reasonable conceptualization of the apostrophized experiences—I cannot see that a new wording would be any improvement. The sharpening of the argumentation for secular spirituality by putting the experience outside both ordinary awareness and emotions calls for no less than a new psychology of the human being!

In my mind, your ambitious enterprise paradoxically adds another argument that questions the meaningfulness of the concept. It is thus still open

to question whether there is any place for “spirituality” at all.

REFERENCES

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