

# The Epistemology of Spiritual Happiness

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## Abstract

This paper uses the idea of spiritual happiness to explore some issues regarding the difference between science and spirituality. It suggests that those pursuing spirituality feel more inclined to adopt a modernist theoretical framework than those pursuing religion, and so are hesitant to declare that spirituality has a different ontology, methodology, taxonomy and epistemology than science. The argument is made here that they are indeed different but that as long as spirituality is argued for as intrinsically pluralistic – supported by suitable nuanced taxonomies – it can live comfortably within the modern world and also draw on relevant hard science and social science research to argue its case. This is important where professionals in a wide range of disciplines want to acknowledge the spiritual needs of their practitioners or clients.

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## Introduction

One can use the idea of spiritual happiness to explore the question of spirituality from the perspective of its ontology, its taxonomy and its epistemology. This means considering the nature of the realities that spirituality addresses (ontology),

the variety of those realities (taxonomy), and what we can collectively know of those realities (epistemology). Is, on the one hand, spirituality so hopelessly personal and varied that we, meaning humanity as a whole, should best forget about any 'knowledge' yielded by its study, or, on the other hand, can the scientific method be applied to this field and provide reliable uncontested truths? The first case is giving up. The second, in my opinion, allows for a hostile takeover bid from the sciences in which spirituality is distorted beyond recognition. What I am looking for is some kind of middle ground which might be useful to professionals wishing to bring in a spiritual element to their professional practice. Here I am thinking about social workers, health care professionals – particularly in mental health and hospice work – the prison system, and those running enlightened businesses and social spaces such as meditation rooms provided in shopping malls and airports. In all these cases those arguing for such provision have to work within mainstream thinking and pretty much make a 'scientific' case. Can this be done convincingly without compromising what spirituality actually means?

If we understand happiness as a form of fulfilment then perhaps we have a clearer idea of what spiritual happiness might be, a form of fulfilment that derives exclusively from the pursuit of the spiritual life as opposed to some other discipline. If, for example, a scientist has a moment of revelation – for example Kekulé's well-known dream-insight into the structure of benzene – then the ensuing fulfilment, as a kind of happiness, has arisen from the pursuit of scientific enquiry. We can draw analogies between the pursuit of spirituality and the pursuit of science, discovering that exemplars in both fields only came to their revelations through intense practice of their disciplines, and finding perhaps comparable descriptions of the ensuing happiness or fulfilment. I raise this analogy to flag up what is crucial to my thesis, which is that while such analogies exist across many fields of endeavour we should not assume common ontologies, taxonomies, methodologies or epistemologies. Note that to the list which includes ontology, taxonomy and epistemology I have now inserted methodology, meaning a systematic form of enquiry or disciplinary practice. From my perspective all four are radically different in each field of human enquiry and to assume that they are commensurable across disciplines is to do violence to each discipline.

Unfortunately we live in a time where Western culture has assumed that science possesses the definitive ontology, taxonomy, methodology and epistemology.

A scientist making a breakthrough, a politician winning an election, a composer completing a concerto, a writer publishing a novel, a sportsman with a personal best. All of these people may well experience happiness and fulfilment arising from these moments. Each of these disciplines will have an 'episteme' by which I mean a body of knowledge to which the practitioner is in debt to and may expand on. Each has a taxonomy, that is, a way of dividing up that knowledge. Each has a

practice, or methodology. Each has an ontology, meaning postulates concerning the underlying realities or ground of the field, these grounds in these examples being respectively matter/energy, society, music, literature and the body-in-action. But what happens when the first of these fields declares that there is only one ontological basis to everything, i.e. matter? Then society becomes matter interacting with matter, music becomes matter interacting with matter, literature becomes matter interacting with matter and sport becomes matter interacting with matter. Surely this is an impoverishment of thought.

A person pursuing the spiritual life may have breakthroughs, leading to happiness or fulfilment of a uniquely spiritual nature. These are well-documented over centuries and from all cultures, and we will see shortly how varied these are. Science however will insist that such breakthroughs be understood in terms of matter, and more specifically in terms of neurology. All experience, argues science, is gathered by the senses, passed to the brain via the nervous system, and there processed. If you understand the processing, you understand the experience and it matters not a jot if that experience is held by those in their own fields to be spiritual, political, musical, literary, or sporting. This reductionist philosophy of science has been usefully termed 'consilience' by biologist E. O. Wilson. He says:

The central idea of the consilience world view is that all tangible phenomena, from the birth of stars to the workings of social institutions, are based on material processes that are ultimately reducible, however long and tortuous the sequences, to the laws of physics.' (Wilson 1998: 266)

To counter the consilience viewpoint I have developed an epistemology which I call an 'isthmus theory of knowledge domains' (King 2013a), drawing – perhaps surprisingly – on the work of novelist Robert Pirsig (1991). I suggest that his work is typical of what I call 'outsider scholarship', that is ways of thinking not bound by the university system, and which include thinkers with a strong spiritual leaning, such as Arthur Koestler, Douglas Harding, E. F. Schumacher and Ken Wilber. Outsider scholarship can provide a counterweight to consilience and so free spirituality from a false kind of scientific reductionism.

## The varieties of spiritual happiness

Happiness is temporary  
Believe me, I know  
It can arrive as a shining crystal  
And leave as the melting snow  
Come all you lads and lasses  
The Kingdom of Childhood passes

(Chorus from Joan Baez, 'Kingdom Of Childhood')

Although I will bring up an example that is perhaps an exception, I think it useful to postulate that spiritual happiness is as temporary as any other. If we link happiness to fulfilment, then, to use a hydraulic metaphor, you cannot fill a vessel that does not also empty. The Sufis have a different metaphor for spiritual happiness or spiritual fulfilment, namely the seasons. Winter always comes round again, they say, but it is seen in this tradition as a necessary preparation for spring. More, this rhythm is one of expansion and contraction, and I would suggest that most of us would recognise that happiness is associated with a state of expansion while unhappiness with a state of contraction.

As well as postulating that spiritual happiness is mostly temporary we also need to recognise its variety. Many midwives will tell you that, other than from the mothers of babies and those in the profession, they get the response that 'they all look the same'. Most disciplines are like that. For a severely non-musical person all music is the same. For a classical enthusiast all pop music is the same, including R&B. For an R&B enthusiast all rap is the same, and so on. It takes a certain kind of temperament to properly taxonomise a field, one that can stand back from personal preference. Musicologists taxonomise music on basis that is intrinsic to their field, not borrowed from elsewhere. Spirituality is rather like music, or perhaps fine art, in that to properly taxonomise it one must first of all not be tone-deaf to it, and secondly not be emotionally committed to any one kind of spirituality. Once an equitable taxonomy is constructed, unique to the discipline, one that has given equal weight to all divisions arising within the discipline, then the shape of that discipline comes into focus. It is only then, I would argue, that the ontology, methodology and epistemology of that discipline falls into place. In other words without a comprehensive taxonomy we cannot assess what we know about a field, or how we know it, or how to extend what we know through a systematic practice. Above all we do not know to what underlying reality this discipline addresses itself.

The field of religion and film can be used to illustrate these points. I received ARHB research funding some years ago for a project called 'Postsecular Cinema', a survey of spirituality and religion in film. To gain funding I had to propose a methodology, which was based on a taxonomy of the spiritual life that I shall introduce below, but for several years I struggled to shoehorn relevant films into this structure. I had a body of over 400 films which did not easily divide up into the taxonomy I wanted to impose, and I realised in the end that I could not simply take the taxonomy that worked well in the field of spirituality and impose it onto the field of film. They dealt with different fundamentals. The solution was to recognise that the field religion-and-film was in itself a unique discipline – or better 'interdiscipline' – to which should be applied the '*sui generis*' rule, meaning that it was more than the sum of, and different to, its parts. (*Sui generis* means 'self-generating'.) It was the Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky who led me to this insight in his book on cin-

ema where he explained that it was wrong to think of film as merely the sum of theatre and film technology (1989: 37). It was a discipline *sui generis*. Once I realised this I let the interdiscipline instruct me on its taxonomy leading to this list:

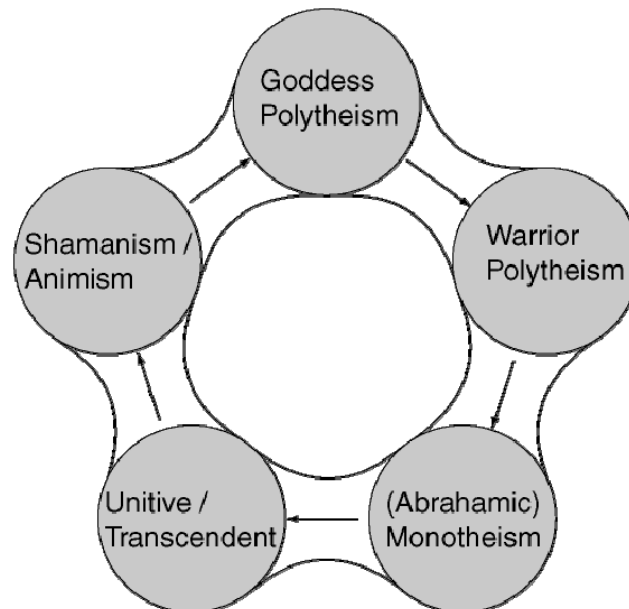
1. Spiritual Aesthetics, Nature and the Romantic
2. The Esoteric, the New Age, and Neoplatonism
3. Dying, Suicide and Bereavement
4. Angels and the Ghosts, Afterlife
5. Reincarnation and Resurrection
6. Spiritual Chaos and Rubber Reality
7. Wisdom, Teachers, and Disciples
8. Priests, Monks, Nuns and Spiritual Community
9. Spiritual Practice, Discipline and the Martial Arts
10. Violence, Compassion, Forgiveness and Atonement
11. East vs. West
12. Secular vs. Spiritual

These twelve categories allowed for the 400-odd films to fall into roughly equal-sized heaps, without leaving out any significant film or creating a category that was mostly empty (King 2013). The ontology of this interdiscipline then became clear: it is a universe of the spiritual made dramatic. In turn – and this was the surprising conclusion – it meant that the interdiscipline largely deals with moral issues. The methodology was to listen to the field, allow its taxonomy to emerge, from there discover its ontological basis, and finally draw this epistemic conclusion, that the field brings forth knowledge of a moral nature expressed in dramatic form. All of this became possible only by recognising that the field could not be studied by imposing onto it an alien ontology, methodology, taxonomy or epistemology.

### **A taxonomy of the spiritual life**

Turning now to a taxonomy of the spiritual life one has to remark that many interesting attempts have been made at this. No single answer can be definitive, I would suggest, and hence I developed what I call a ‘baggy schemata’ for my books *Secularism* (King 2007) and *Postsecularism* (King 2009). I drew widely on existing schemes and extended them leading to a ‘two-fold model of spiritual difference’ which recognises the tension between a historically located modality of the spirit which acts on the individual from outside, and a multivalent set of personal spiritual impulses that act on the individual from within. The historical or external component of the scheme could be mis-read as a kind of Hegelian or Wilberian developmental model, if not deployed alongside the personal component. Conversely the personal or internal component alone would create the impression of an acultural free-floating ‘self’, not influenced by the historical setting.

The external part of my model is summed up in this diagram, a taxonomy that includes historical sequence five stages (King 2007: 53). There is not space here to go into these in detail, other than to say that East and West are sharply differentiated in their spiritual history because the East skipped the stage of monotheism ('East' here being east of Iran).



The internal part of the model is summed up in a set of four polarities:

1. esoteric vs. transcendent
2. *bhakti* vs. *jnani* (devotional vs. non-devotional)
3. *via positiva* vs. *via negativa* (orientation to the manifest world)
4. solitary vs. social. (King 2007: 59)

'Esoteric' here means the cultivation of so-called spiritual powers centred on the capacity to interact with the spirit world, juxtaposed against a different impulse, the 'transcendent' which is to detach oneself from all manifest experience whether of the material or spiritual plane. '*Bhakti*' here means the devotional as opposed to '*jnani*' the non-devotional, roughly speaking spiritual paths respectively of the heart and head. '*Via positiva*' is a spiritual orientation that is world-curious, juxtaposed to '*via negativa*', a spiritual orientation that seeks escape from the world. Finally 'solitary' and 'social' refer to opposing impulses to respectively pursue the spiritual life alone or in company.

Again, there is not space here to go into great detail on this scheme, other than to say that individuals inherit the spiritual preoccupations of their temporal and geo-

graphical location which may or may not be in tune with the precise constellation of personal polarities, which themselves are in dynamic relationship, varying over a lifetime or even over a single day.

Whether this scheme is regarded as either useful or comprehensive should not matter, but what does matter is that we recognise the very great variety exhibited in the spiritual life.

### Three forms of spiritual happiness

I will now consider three forms of spiritual happiness that can be described respectively under the headings, bliss, community and benignity.

**Bliss** In my work I use my two-fold model to describe the path of the Buddha as transcendent in its historical location and *jnani via negativa* in terms of personal polarities, meaning that this is a world-denying non-devotional path of detachment. In the Pali Canon the Buddha explicitly describes a form of spiritual happiness as 'bliss'. Its recognition formed a turning point in his path to enlightenment and was also a state he could enter at will. This bliss appears to have no cause in the normal sense, perhaps more like a ground of being that is normally obscured by our other preoccupations. The Buddha does not make this bliss a goal however, merely commenting on its existence and also that the non-adept cannot experience any kind of happiness with the same longevity. It is only here I think that one could argue for a permanent kind of happiness on the basis that it is uncaused, meaning also that we cannot remove its cause. However this sets the bar too high for spiritual happiness, i.e. it requires enlightenment of the kind that the Buddha experienced and which we have good grounds for thinking is a difficult attainment.

**Community** Staying with Buddhism again it is clear that the Buddha's spiritual community – termed *sangha* – is an 'elective community' as distinct from those that form from family and work. It is one in which spiritual happiness arises from the mutual support provided in pursuing a spiritual practice. It is also clear that the Buddha worked hard to construct rules for the *sangha*, which it is typical of spiritual or religious communities in later historical periods where a demarcation is made between the life of the 'householder' and the life of the religious aspirant. In early spiritual history, perhaps that of the animist and Goddess eras, such a demarcation would make little sense. Hence the happiness or fulfilment of those in a *sangha* or religious community are different to those of the householder, and are at the same time different to the specific fulfilment promised in the attainment of the religious goal – in this case enlightenment. To put it another way friendships made in the spiritual life lead to a different form of happiness to those in the secular life and are also within reach of the ordinary aspirant.

**Benignity** In the writings of the Nature mystics such as Richard Jeffries, John Muir, Henry Thoreau, Walt Whitman, John Burroughs (contemporary of Whitman) and many others we find reportage of a spiritual happiness the context of which is the natural world, and the best term for which that I can find is 'benignity'. In contrast to the happiness of *sangha* the happiness of the Nature mystic is usually to be found in solitary immersion in wilderness. In Thoreau's case he actively sought this state, referring to the condition only as 'it', an 'it' that might come as a result of a day's walking but might not – clearly a condition akin to grace and which cannot be summoned on demand (Cook 1940: 9).

We can now contemplate an extension of the case of benignity which brings us sharply into conflict with the scientific world-view. So far our three happinesses arise as mental states open to description in neuroscientific terms. The *jnani* orientation of Buddhism requires no supernatural elements, or at least what supernatural elements there are in the Pali Canon can be bracketed out and still leave a coherent spiritual doctrine. Hence the Buddha's 'bliss' is not necessarily unacceptable to modern atheists who hold a materialist view of the world. Neither is the happiness of spiritual community necessarily an affront to the hardened atheist: it can in principle be investigated drawing on research methodology in the social sciences. The religious basis for the community may be discounted or even derided – as for example in the work of Freud – but the community is a physical fact and reportage of happiness so arising can be taken at face value. The benignity experienced by the Nature mystics can be approached as a kind of heightened aesthetic awareness and is in principle amenable to the emerging methodologies of neuroaesthetics. But we now approach a problem area which I term the 'esoteric' or 'occult' in my two-fold model of the spiritual life, involving experiences of non-material beings or powers. While the Nature mystics can be isolated as a group of largely Victorian poets and writers, offering parallels perhaps with elements of Taoism or Zen, their experiences clearly overlap with accounts of animist or shamanic Nature. What if the sense of benignity is reported as explicitly the outcome of encountering a forest spirit, a *shishigami* of the Japanese tradition? Or the spirit of a dead person? How do we understand the writings of an occultist like Rudolf Steiner, who claimed to live more intensely in the spirit world than the material one up to the age of thirty, or Paramahansa Yogananda whose autobiography describes esoteric powers? No proper taxonomy of the spiritual life can be complete while ignoring such accounts, and these cannot be bracketed in with the aesthetic.

While Western science dismisses such ideas as the 'spirit world' and ignores spiritualist churches predicated on it, Western culture explores such things with abandon. In my book on religion and film I begin the chapter on ghosts, angels and the afterlife by asking the question: what is the ontological status of the 'ghost?' (King 2013: 81.) The sheer number of thoughtful films on these subjects makes the question necessary. While directors such as Hitchcock pursue the device of allowing



such questions full reign through a film – such as the issue of reincarnation in *Vertigo* – he ensures no clash with the scientific worldview remain with the viewer. This is achieved by some twist in the story that provides a rational, scientific or Freudian explanation at the end. (In *Vertigo* references to reincarnation turn out to have been faked, leading the male protagonist to rail in the end against the ‘beautiful phoney trances’ of the female protagonist). Other directors allow no such compromise for their viewers, as for example in the film *The Sixth Sense* by M Night Shyamalan, famous for the ‘I see dead people’ quote. The ‘dead people’ or ghosts in question are real, or to use other terms we could call them other-embodied beings or other-embodied persons. Any large-scale survey of the phenomenology of the spiritual life will always include accounts of such beings or persons, but at the same time shows that a proper taxonomy of the spiritual life includes many branches where they either play no role or their role is irrelevant, subsidiary, or a distraction. Martin Buber famously chided the Buddha for ‘making the gods his pupils’ (Buber 1999: 120) where the ‘gods’ in question are various forms of disembodied beings. The Buddha accepts their existence but denies them the potential for enlightenment.

## Why science and spirituality are different

With this brief taxonomical overview of the spiritual life and contemplation of a few of its unique happinesses we can now juxtapose the domains of science and spirituality. Lord Kelvin once remarked that in science there was physics and there was stamp collecting, meaning that the sciences beyond physics have a more taxonomical nature, indeed biology was in its origins almost entirely taxonomical, going all the way back to Aristotle. What marks out physics is its analysis of the world as forces acting on matter. We find here a terminological precision, an analytical reach and a predictive power unmatched by any other science, let alone by any non-scientific discipline. ‘Physics envy’ then becomes the hallmark of other disciplines, cemented in place – though not in those terms – by the optimistic efforts of Enlightenment thinkers to adapt the scientific method to all other disciplines. Leibniz was perhaps the most determined of these thinkers, while more recently economics is still attempting to construct economic ‘laws of motion’ by analogy with Newton’s findings in mechanics. That these efforts have mostly proven to be fruitless has not dampened enthusiasm for applying the methods of science to the domain of spirituality.

### Wilber and the RSA report

We can usefully take a report by the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) as measuring the contemporary temperature of the science-spirituality debate. Titled ‘Spiritualise: Revitalising spirituality to address 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges’ the report sums up the findings of a project the main aim of

which 'was to examine whether new scientific understandings of human nature might help us reconceive the nature and value of spiritual perspectives, practices and experiences.' (Rowson 2014.) In my review of the report for the JSS I suggested that it produced 'a memorable synthesis and no doubt an accurate record of the zeitgeist.' (King 2015.) However my reservations about it can be focussed on an idea that Rowson takes from Ken Wilber:

In the book, *Sense and Soul*, Wilber argues that if spirituality is to merge with 21<sup>st</sup> century science, the study of spirituality must be based on falsifiable evidence. While something important will always be lost in the measurement process, spiritual experience can in principle lend itself to scientific scrutiny and falsifiability and it is no coincidence that empirical research into spiritual experiences is currently underway on multiple fronts in psychology and neuroscience." (Rowson 2014: 47)

Why on earth would we want spirituality to merge with 21<sup>st</sup> century science? I have pointed out that attempts at such a merger amount to 'scientific magisterial imperialism' (King 2002), referencing the idea of non-overlapping 'magisteria' proposed by the late scientist Stephen Jay Gould, a 'magisterium' being his term for a field of study or discipline (Gould 2001). Wilber appears to be aware of the dangers, having written in an early book called *Quantum Questions* that modern physics offers no support let alone proof of the mystical worldview, conceding however that to hold this position would be to swim against the New Age tide (Wilber 1985). Later, in *The Marriage of Sense and Soul*, he postulates an 'epistemological pluralism' but backs off from it:

All the past forms of epistemological pluralism *failed the test of modernity* because science itself did not and would not fundamentally doubt its own competence to reveal all important forms of truth.' (Wilber 1998: 141) (His italics.)

Nearly two decades on Wilber's point seems all the more entrenched. We may be encouraged that a pre-eminently technological organisation like the RSA has commissioned a study into spirituality, that it drew on a wide spectrum of expert opinion, and that its findings are encouraging for the spiritual life. But we find no spiritual pluralism in it and no sense that the discipline of spirituality deals with practices (methodologies), taxonomies, epistemologies and fundamental realities not within the remit of science. Neuroscience can examine a Buddhist practitioner in a state of bliss and tell us about the activity of neurons. These are the famous 'neural correlates' of experience. My counter to this is to say, yes, our scientific instruments may increasingly provide non-invasive methods for mapping neural activity onto experience, but what if we turn this around and ask what are the *experiential correlates* of neural activity? There are none. We cannot experience our neurons, or for that matter our brain, not at least the brain as described in neuroscience.

The knowledge of brain and neuron so gained remains in the magisterium of science.

In a similar vein the social science methods of participant observation and ethnomethodology may be deployed in examining the happiness and fulfilment found through *sangha*. This kind of research generates reportage that is taken at face value – the larger truth claims within these reports being neither rejected nor accepted – and then analysed yielding statistical data. 50% of participants claim that missing two or more weekly gatherings result in low mood. 33% of participants claim uplifted after 75% of prayer meetings. And so on. But again the numbers here don't belong to the spiritual life, but to the magisterium of science. They tell us nothing about the lived experience of *sangha* or the magisterium of spirit.

If non-invasive techniques allowed a Nature mystic roam unencumbered then perhaps Thoreau's 'it' could be recorded as a neuronal pattern. We would then know what the neural correlates of a Nature-triggered mystical experience are and could compare them with those of the Buddhist practitioner. But what if the Nature mystic was an animist or shaman whose reportage insisted on non-material beings as the trigger for the experience? What if the sense of benignity was the outcome of encountering a *shishigami*, a wood-spirit, or the spirit of a mountain, or the personality of a Native American spirit guide or of a long-dead ancestor? Science is not in a position to assess the truth-claims here of the existence of differently-embodied persons. Worse still some boundary is crossed, some contract with the modern world remains broken. The ontological foundation of these experiences is not that of science.

It is for these reasons that I think we should object to Wilson's theory of consilience, or indeed the wider scientism and reductionism that frames it.

### **An isthmus theory of knowledge domains**

Wilber gave up on epistemological pluralism because it failed the test of modernity. Gould's offering of non-overlapping magisteria (NOMA) has been widely rejected by the science community (e.g. Dennett 2007: 30). My own suggestion of magisteria as continents joined by narrow isthmuses is as yet not taken up in any quarter, but I offer it again. In my paper (King 2013a) I identify 'isthmuses' such as the periodic table between physics and chemistry, the script between religion and film, and the algorithm between mathematics and computer art. The most popular isthmus between science and religion is quantum theory, but I suggest that, because we find it in only one of the magisteria in question it is more like a Trojan horse, offered by science to religion but which religion would be advised not to accept as a gift. Finally, to bring into stark relief why I think that science and religion are indeed separate domains, let us use a popular quote from Einstein regarding the conse-

quence of a forced integration of science and spirituality as the RSA report seems to be pursuing. I wrote:

Many people have been impressed by Einstein's dictum: 'Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.' I disagree with it: science without religion is what enables science to run so fast (just think of Galileo), while religion without science is what enables religion to see so far. The attempted integration of the two would yield a blind cripple, not a far-sighted sprinter. (King 2013a)

Why do I say a blind cripple? Simply because the melding of two magisteria requires a common ontology, methodology, taxonomy and epistemology. I hope I have shown that if spirituality were to adopt the ontology, methodology, taxonomy and epistemology of science we would just land up with more science. Spirituality itself would be crippled. Conversely, prayer, meditation, walking in Nature and the cultivation of faculties for encountering spirit entities would never have revealed the Periodic Table, Newton's laws of motion or quantum theory. By all means let the continents of science and spirituality have some narrow passages of contact, for example a recognition that scientific creativity, as in the case of Kekulé, is enhanced by intuition a little like that of the mystic. These can only be productive if unforced by either partner. But the vast hinterlands of each magisterium should be unhindered by the alien ontologies, methodologies, taxonomies or epistemologies of the other.

We can speculate that Wilber chose to abandon epistemological pluralism because he wanted to have a voice within modernity. A writer can make the choice either way and probably still find an audience, but we must recognise that a whole range of professionals have to work within the largely scientific framework of the age or lose funding or their jobs. The real world always requires compromises. It is here where the isthmus theory is perhaps most useful, offering a strip of dry land to travel between continents. We don't have to plunge deep into the heartland of materialism where there is nothing but the neural correlates of spiritual experience. If a scientist wants to live there, that is fine. What we can do is draw on studies that, for example, show that meditation helps reduce violence in a prison population, backed up by neuroscience studies on calming. Once the funding flows from proposals drawing on these findings we can engage with prisoners and bring them across the isthmus as far into the continent of spirituality as lies in the capacity of the meditation teacher. Neural correlates are left behind. Or we can present survey data suggesting that a majority of those at the front line of hospice work find that on-site participation in some form of spiritual practice prevents burn-out. We don't have to then agree that spirituality can only be understood through neuroscience.

### A pluralistic epistemology of spirituality

Wilber abandoned epistemological pluralism because he wanted to be part of, and acknowledged by, modernity. Perhaps this is the hallmark of spirituality rather than religion. We find plenty of religious thinkers not only uninterested in participating in the philosophical outlook of modernity but positively critical of it. Spirituality is perhaps less able or willing to abandon the claim of being modern, and so it has to answer the fundamental question that science puts to it. 'What firm knowledge does your discipline reveal?' After all Richard Dawkins says that religion is a 'know nothing' and 'no contest' domain of human endeavour. The answer generally given, that spirituality involves a form of knowing not a form of knowledge, does not easily satisfy science. Nor does the claim that the episteme that spirituality addresses itself to is that of the irreducibly non-material. But, if we can show that studies in spirituality can construct meaningful and comprehensive taxonomies of the spiritual life then we have perhaps something more substantial. And if, more for our own consumption, we can construct a taxonomy of the spiritual life which at the same time leads to an epistemology of spiritual happiness, i.e. a meaningful and comprehensive map of the varied forms of fulfilment arising from a spiritual outlook and spiritual practice, then why not? It is the pluralism that is crucial here, a pluralism that also recognises from the outset that any form of public funding for spirituality delivered in any work, care or education context must make provision for all parties involved to have a clear opt-out. Strongly held atheism is a worldview that many base their personal dignity on and those who self-classify as 'spiritual' need to fully acknowledge this.

## Conclusions

Most people interesting in bringing spirituality into their professional practice will not be familiar with terms such as 'ontology', 'epistemology' and 'taxonomy', these being more the domain of the professional philosopher. If science – of the sort underpinning the RSA report – is taking an interest in spirituality and offers support in scientific terms for its introduction into the workplace, then all to the good. All I am doing here is to ring a small alarm bell that this particular gift horse may have Trojan elements within it, even if unwittingly, in particular such things as 'consilience', the doctrine that all is reducible to physics. Therefore I think it useful to have a defence at hand to say that spirituality does something very different to science, and does not have to bow to *all* the tenets of modernity. However what spirituality can do which religion often cannot is to offer a key modernist credential: pluralism. We must firmly talk about spiritualities in the plural and with no hint of preference, or even – and this is the hard bit – with no preference over non-spirituality. From that base we can introduce more technical issues such as taxonomy, epistemology and so on if we need to. But in the first instance let us be clear: the spiritual life brings varied and unique forms of happiness and fulfilment. Maybe they are as passing as

the melting snow, but then maybe too they are perennial and as nourishing to us as the spring after winter.

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