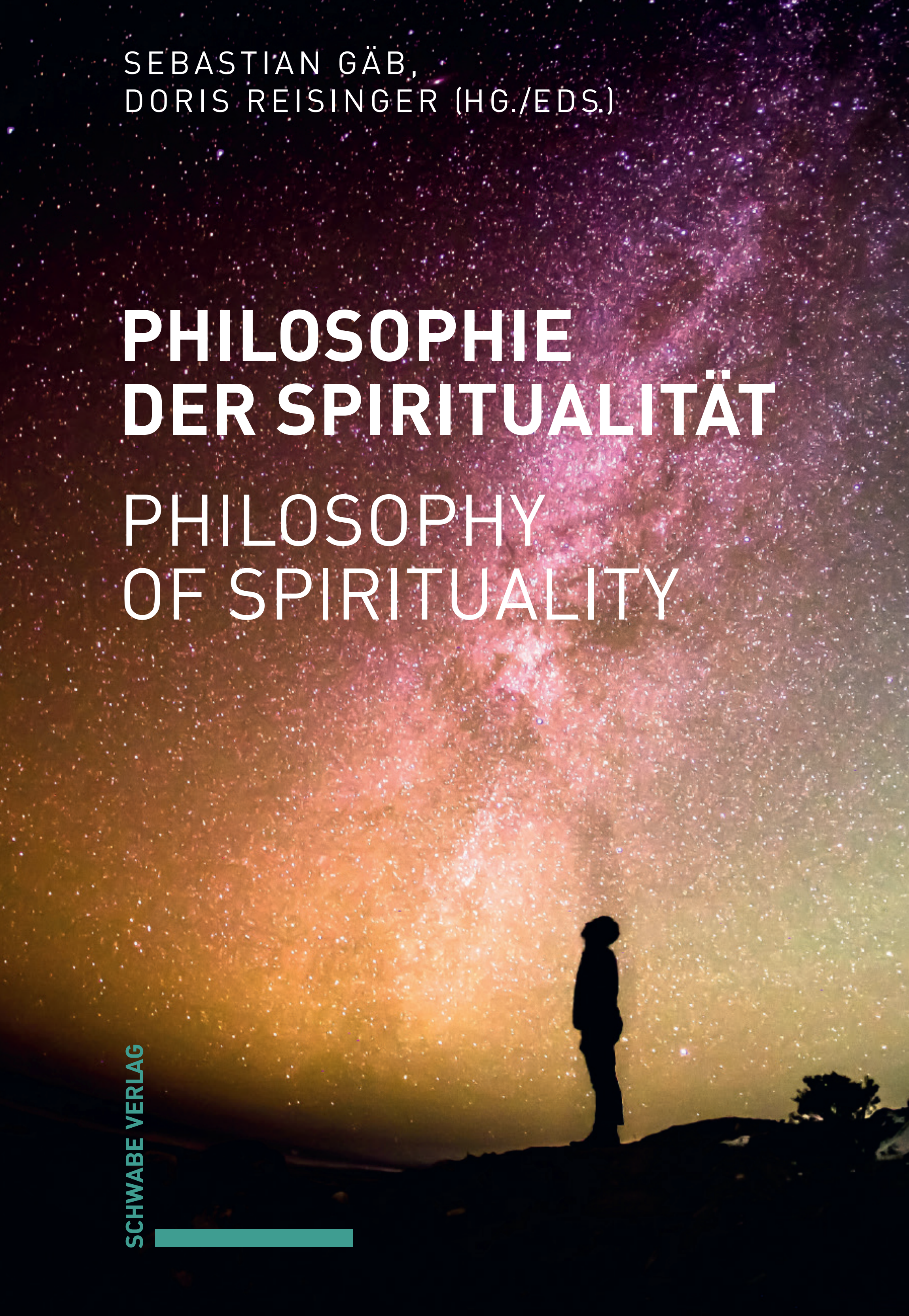

SEBASTIAN GÄB,
DORIS REISINGER (HG./EDS.)

PHILOSOPHIE DER SPIRITUALITÄT

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Spirituality without Religion

Sebastian Gäb

1. Spiritual but not Religious

More and more people identify as spiritual but not religious (SBNR). Surveys on religious attitudes in Western countries regularly show that about 10 to 15 percent of respondents put themselves into this category. "Spirituality" is a well-established concept in the psychology and sociology of religion and is standardly used to measure a certain type of religious attitude and lifestyle. Often, it is defined (quite broadly) as, for example, a kind of "privatized, experience-oriented religion", in contrast to the "organized, tradition-oriented" religious life of established institutions.[1] Accordingly, self-identification as "spiritual but not religious" typically correlates with a critical stance towards traditional religious institutions, a rejection of belief in a theistic God, and an emphasis on personal experience.[2] This doesn't mean that spirituality and religion are seen as mutually exclusive, though: a large group (larger than the SBNRs) considers themselves spiritual *and* religious. (Interestingly, there are even a few who describe themselves as religious, but not spiritual.)[3] Religion and spirituality, it seems, are cognate phenomena, with "religion" being associated with the institutional, organized, practical side of religious life, while "spirituality" is seen as describing its private, individual, experiential aspects. Given this understanding of the terms, sociologists of religion have been skeptical about the claim that nonreligious spirituality and religiousness are separate phenomena. Nancy Ammermann for example claims that "spiritual-but-not-religious […] is more a moral and political category than an empirical one",[4] meaning that the empirically observable characteristics of nonreligious spirituality overlap significantly with their religious counterpart and that the primary intention behind identifying oneself as spiritual but not religious is to reject *traditional* forms of religion and religious institutions.

This closeness between the two concepts might be one of the reasons that have led quite a few philosophers in recent years to reclaim the concept of spirituality and use it in a specifically nonreligious sense: nonreligious spirituality, it

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1 Streib/Hood 2016, 9.

2 S. Wixwat/Saucier 2021 for details.

3 S. Streib/Klein/Hood 2016 for some exemplary data.

4 Ammermann 2013, 275. S. also Sheldrake 2012, 92 f. and Streib/Hood 2016, 9 for critiques of treating religion and spirituality as opposites.

seems, offers a possibility of preserving what's best and desirable about traditional religion without having to subscribe to those parts of religion (the dogmas and institutions) that have come to be seen as outdated, unjustified, and potentially even dangerous. Spirituality without religion, then, might be an alternative between traditional (often theistic) religious worldviews and an unmitigated naturalism that is seen more and more as cold, lifeless, and insufficient to address the existential needs of human beings. Recent examples in philosophical literature include Ronald Dworkin's *Religion without God*, Thomas Metzinger's *Spirituality and Intellectual Honesty*, or Robert Solomon's *Spirituality for the Skeptic*. Moreover, there are some books written for wider audiences that describe conceptions of spirituality without religion: André Comte-Sponville's *Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, Sam Harris' *Waking Up*, or Martin Hägglund's *This Life*.[5] What unites all these authors is the intention to develop a meaningful concept of nonreligious spirituality that will at once preserve important elements of traditional religious spirituality and be compatible with a naturalist or atheist worldview. Beyond this, there is little these authors agree on. Some subscribe explicitly to varieties of metaphysical naturalism, others don't;[6] some see nonreligious spirituality as fundamentally similar to religion, others treat them as polar opposites;[7] and some regard nonreligious spirituality primarily as a matter of having spiritual experiences while others see it as practice or form of life.[8] It seems as if there is a broad variety of disparate, perhaps even incompatible concepts of nonreligious spirituality available on the philosophical market, with no attempt at harmonizing them in sight. Thus, it remains unclear what nonreligious spirituality is supposed to be if it is to be more than a sociological category. This paper is an attempt at answering this question.

Of course, any concept of nonreligious spirituality is only as good as the definition of religion it presupposes – after all, being *not religious* is the defining mark of this kind of spirituality. But the concept of religion is notoriously hard to define, and what's more, as we have just seen, the boundaries between religion and spirituality are rather blurry. Most religions have developed their own spiritual traditions and practices, some self-proclaimed nonreligious forms of spirituality might well be described as alternative religious movements, and some au-

5 Dworkin 2013, Metzinger 2014, Solomon 2002, Comte-Sponville 2007, Harris 2014, Hägglund 2019.

6 Flanagan 2007 talks explicitly about the question how spirituality could be conceived within a naturalistic framework, while Dworkin (2013, 13) states that "the religious [spiritual] attitude rejects all forms of naturalism."

7 Metzinger (2014, 5) declares that spirituality is the opposite of religion, while Dworkin 2013 doesn't even employ the term "spirituality" but rather speaks of a religion without God.

8 Comte-Sponville 2007 thinks of spirituality as rooted in a kind of atheist mysticism, for Solomon 2002, it's a passionate way of life, while for Metzinger (2014,7) it's primarily a kind of epistemic practice.

thors use the term "religion" in a highly specific sense that essentially overlaps with certain understandings of "spirituality".[9] But then, what is the point of speaking of "nonreligious" spirituality, if there is no clear distinction between religion and spirituality? We need to answer this question: What does the "nonreligious" in nonreligious spirituality mean?

Most scholars of religion agree that "religion" is a multidimensional concept comprising things like ritual practices, dogmatic beliefs, communities, shared myths and stories, or a system of morals and values.[10] Nonreligious spirituality typically rejects some, though not all dimensions of religion. In particular, three aspects are most salient:

(1) Self-identification: Those who identify as spiritual but not religious describe their position as "secular", "atheist", or "nonreligious" and regard this as an essential part of their worldview.
(2) Rejection of religious institutions: Nonreligious spirituality rejects any affiliation with established religious institutions, traditions, or dogmas, and emphasizes individual spiritual experiences and freedom instead. This is why nonreligious spirituality can also be called "secular".
(3) Rejection of supernaturalism: Nonreligious spirituality entails a rejection of supernaturalism or even calls for an outright acceptance of metaphysical naturalism.[11] Nonreligious spiritualities are particularly hostile towards ideas like theism, the soul, or immortality. In this respect, philosophical accounts of nonreligious spirituality differ markedly from the socio-psychological category.

Nonreligious spirituality, then, is nonreligious in a practical and a theoretical sense: it's practically nonreligious insofar as it doesn't rely on the established forms of religious life (churches, monasteries, prayer etc.), and theoretically nonreligious insofar as it rejects traditional religious beliefs that presuppose a supernatural reality – most notably, belief in some kind of God or gods.

9 Again, Dworkin 2013 is the prime example. Moreover, Williams James' description of religion in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (James 2002, ch. 2) could be easily translated into a concept of nonreligious spirituality. James clearly had the intention of explaining what religion is, but in doing so he inadvertently happened to describe spirituality, too.

10 Classically: Smart 1996.

11 Why not call it *naturalized* spirituality right away, if this is the key element in nonreligious spirituality? In fact, some authors (Solomon 2002, 33; Flanagan 2007, 183) explicitly talk about naturalizing spirituality. But this would exclude some interesting varieties of nonreligious spirituality that reject beliefs in the supernatural but don't accept a full-blown naturalist worldview either. Dworkin for example accepts the anti-naturalist claim that moral facts are objectively real but doesn't accept religious supernaturalism (Dworkin 2011, 23–39). Therefore, I'd prefer to speak of nonreligious spirituality, saying only what it is not, instead of hastily yoking the concept together with a certain type of metaphysics.

But now, another question arises: given that the concept of spirituality is originally rooted in religious traditions, what justifies calling this nonreligious attitude "spiritual"? In speaking of "nonreligious spirituality", we are sequestering the concept of spirituality from the concept of religion – but is this even possible, or will any self-proclaimed nonreligious spirituality implicitly rely on hidden religious (or quasi-religious) beliefs? Again, this paper is an attempt at answering this question.

So, two questions will be the focus of my investigation: (a) What is spirituality without religion? (b) What is the relation between religion and nonreligious spirituality? To answer them, I will give an account of what nonreligious spirituality might be. But this account should not be understood as the result of a conceptual analysis of "spirituality" – looking at the sheer variety of nonreligious spiritualities available, it seems hardly credible that there even is a single concept to be analyzed. Rather, I will try to give an outline of something like a common core in these nonreligious spiritualities: the bare minimum any reasonable concept of nonreligious spirituality must contain to be acceptable as a kind of nonreligious spirituality. For example, the term "God" can comprise a variety of different concepts (classical theism, open theism, personal theism, panentheism etc.) as long as they fulfill the minimal requirements for something to be called a God.[12] Similarly, there is a diversity of spiritualities comprised in the term "nonreligious spirituality", and I will try to make explicit which minimal requirements are at work here, guiding our use of the term "spiritual". That is, I will try to give a set of *adequacy conditions* for concepts of nonreligious spirituality: if something is to be called "nonreligious spirituality", then what properties must it have at the minimum to justify the label? Having answered this more difficult question – what is nonreligious spirituality? – I will briefly move on to the second question: is nonreligious spirituality really nonreligious?

Before I begin to address these questions, let me state explicitly three assumptions I will be making: (a) there actually is something that deserves to be called "nonreligious spirituality" – that is, the phenomenon is real and can't ultimately be reduced to something else (e.g. religion, or belief in God); (b) the various expressions used in this context – e.g. "nonreligious/secular/atheist spirituality", but also "religion without God" or "secular faith" – succeed equally in picking out this particular phenomenon; and (c) religious and nonreligious spiritualities are not essentially different – therefore, by analyzing spirituality *per se* (religious or not), we will also come to understand its nonreligious form. My first attempt at a definition of spirituality is this: *spirituality is a certain type of attitude that individual persons take towards the totality of existence and thereby*

12 This is not to say that there is no disagreement over the bare minimum any reasonable concept of God must fulfil. Even this common core is contested, as well as the criteria by which we could decide what is part of the common core and what isn't.

towards themselves. The characteristic quality of this attitude is an ontological, axiological, and phenomenological reduction or diminution of the individual self in the light of the totality of existence. Adding or subtracting a religious element will only influence the means by which we arrive at this attitude and the words in which we describe it.

2. The Spiritual Attitude

Spirituality is best described as an attitude or stance: a disposition to react to the world in a specific way epistemically, morally, and emotionally. Being spiritual means experiencing the world from a spiritual point of view. To understand spirituality, we need to understand the specific quality of the spiritual experience – the What's-it-Like of being spiritual. Unsurprisingly, most defenders of nonreligious spirituality use terms like "attitude" or "stance" to describe their ideas, too. For example, Dworkin speaks of the "religious attitude", Metzinger calls spirituality an "epistemic stance", and Solomon uses both terms and says that spirituality is "a spiritual stance, a certain attitude".[13] On the one hand, this is a statement about what spirituality is not: spirituality is neither just an emotion nor a specific kind of practice nor a certain set of beliefs. Describing spirituality as an attitude reminds us not to identify it prematurely with any of these related phenomena. On the other hand, the term "attitude" implies that spirituality is a complex phenomenon that contains cognitive and evaluative aspects, that manifests itself in thinking and acting, and that should be seen as a stable character trait of the person it is ascribed to. But what precisely does it mean to have a spiritual attitude? There are five distinct qualities:

(1) *Emotion:* A spiritual attitude has a strong emotional quality which can be positive or negative. Spiritual experiences may be characterized by emotions like love, awe, and enthusiasm, or despair, anxiety, and dejection. This emotional quality is neither superficial nor transient – the spiritual person feels these feelings deeply, and they are a part of their identity.

(2) *Evaluation:* From a spiritual point of view, persons and objects have an *intrinsic* value (or lack of value), e.g. morally or aesthetically. Things are perceived as intrinsically good or beautiful, or as meaningless and empty. Their value or disvalue is intrinsic to them, but not insofar as they are what they are; rather, the whole world is seen as intrinsically valuable (or worthless), and the individual's value merely reflects this fact.

13 Dworkin 2013, 7; Metzinger 2014, 26; Solomon 2002, 22.

(3) *Noetic quality:* A spiritual attitude has noetic (or cognitive) content. This means that it involves the acceptance of what is perceived as a certain insight into the nature of reality. The emotional quality of spiritual experiences and the sense of value in all things stem from certain beliefs about reality the spiritual person has. These beliefs serve as justification for the normative aspects of spirituality. For example, a spiritual person might think that the world is good and valuable, and that each creature deserves to be loved *because* everything was created by a loving god or *because* everything is intrinsically ordered for the ultimate goodness of all that exists. If this person's experience of the world is informed by their beliefs, then this is the reason for them to regard it as good, valuable, and lovable.

(4) *Intentionality:* The spiritual attitude is directed towards an object of experience – that is, it is not just a purely qualitative feeling, like being tired or anxious. Rather, spirituality presents an object in a certain way. The primary object of the spiritual attitude is the world as a whole, or the totality of existence. Being spiritual, then, means taking a specific attitude towards the world, the universe, or *Dasein* per se.

(5) *Self-relation:* Having a spiritual attitude implies a certain stance towards oneself and a certain understanding of how the self relates to the world. This is informed by the kind of beliefs the spiritual person has about reality. The spiritual attitude consists primarily in a certain reaction to the totality of existence which subsequently alters the way the spiritual person relates to their self. Spirituality typically entails a reduction, diminution, or devaluation of the self, or even an experience of selflessness.

Let's take a closer look at these qualities and the way they express themselves in the various forms of nonreligious spirituality.

2.1 Emotional Quality

One central characteristic of the spiritual attitude is that it includes a strong emotional reaction to its object. The spiritual person doesn't remain cold and unaffected when they experience reality; rather, they are in some way touched by it. And not just lightly – being spiritual involves the experience of a deep, profound emotional reaction to life, or reality as a whole. This very profundity is what distinguishes spiritual emotions from their everyday counterparts. Take, for example, William James' description of religion in his *Varieties of Religious Experience.* James, too, notices that the religious (or spiritual) attitude characteristically includes deep and serious emotions:

> For common men 'religion', whatever more special meanings it may have, signifies always a serious state of mind. [...] There must be something solemn, serious, and tender about any attitude which we denominate religious. If glad, it must not grin or snicker; if sad, it must not scream or curse. [...] The divine shall mean for us only such a primal reality as the individual feels impelled to respond to solemnly and gravely, and neither by a curse nor a jest.[14]

Even though James states in this chapter that his intention is merely to clarify his usage of the term "personal religion", it seems as if he has inadvertently also given a description that fits well with our notion of spirituality (or maybe the spiritual side of religion).[15] In this passage, he accurately describes the mood of sublimity and solemnity that characterizes the spiritual experience (the spiritual person may be *awestruck* by the universe, but not *excited* by it), and the depth and gravity of spiritual emotions that distinguishes them from more mundane experiences. So, it's both their amplitude and their intensity that distinguishes spiritual and everyday emotions. Apart from its emotional quality, we should note that spirituality can manifest itself in both positive and negative emotional reactions (as James mentions, too). Not only awe for the universe and love for existence are expressions of spiritual feelings, but also despair and fear, as long as they relate to the totality of reality. Not everyone agrees – when Dworkin says that religion/spirituality holds "that the universe and its creatures are awe-inspiring, that human life has purpose and the universe order",[16] he focuses exclusively on the optimistic side of spirituality. Contrast this with Solomon's account for whom spirituality has two sides, a dark one and a light one:

> The fear of death, grief, and despair are not themselves spiritual emotions, but they often serve as preconditions or anticipations of spirituality and can become spiritual as we think about them, as do joy, love, and certain kinds of trust and gratitude. [...] Spiritual-

14 James 2002, 35.

15 In what follows, I will take it as given that when James speaks of "personal religion", the phenomenon he describes is practically the same as what we mean when we speak of "spirituality". By the end of the paper, I hope that this similarity will have become obvious. Additionally, James declares that he is "willing to accept almost any name for the personal religion of which I propose to treat", and I'm happy to accept this offer and replace his "personal religion" with "spirituality". What's more, he also says about non-theistic belief systems (like Buddhism) that "we must therefore, from the experiential point of view, call these godless or quasi-godless creeds *religions*" (James 2002, 32), making it clear that his concept of religion comprises everything that falls under the category of the religious experience – and thus, also nonreligious spirituality. Since it would be confusing to stick to James' choice of words and speak of "nonreligious religions", I prefer to use the term "nonreligious spirituality" to refer to the attitude James is describing.

16 Dworkin 2013, 1.

> ity embraces love, trust, reverence, and wisdom, as well as the most terrifying aspects of life, tragedy, and death.[17]

Comte-Sponville, too, acknowledges the ambiguous character of spirituality when he pleads for "acceptance" of reality as it is, good or evil, as the core of the spiritual attitude: "Reality: take it or leave it."[18] So, there can be dark modes of spirituality, too, characterized not by an optimistic emotional reaction to reality but rather by a deeply felt dissatisfaction with it. Despair and depression, in their most sublime forms, can be spiritual, too – as can be seen from the biblical *Ecclesiastes*. Statements like: "All is vanity," and "One generation passes away, and another generation comes; but the earth abides forever" show a deeply spiritual outlook on existence.[19]

2.2 Value

The emotional quality of the spiritual attitude connects with its evaluative aspect: the emotional reaction is the result of seeing reality as having an intrinsic value (positive or negative). A spiritual person might, for example, experience nature as *inherently* valuable: plants, animals, or entire ecosystems are not valuable because they are useful to us (or anyone else), but they are inherently so. Those who take a spiritual stance towards nature could thus see it as good and beautiful *per se*. This is most obvious in Dworkin's concept of religion. He practically identifies the religious/spiritual attitude with accepting the objective reality of values:

> Religion is a deep, distinct, and comprehensive worldview: it holds that inherent, objective value permeates everything, that the universe and its creatures are awe-inspiring, that human life has purpose and the universe order.[20]

This objective value can be either ethical (insofar as it concerns human life) or aesthetic (insofar as it concerns the natural world):

> The religious attitude accepts the full, independent reality of value. It accepts the objective truth of two central judgments about value. The first holds that human life has objective meaning or importance. Each person has an innate and inescapable responsibility to try to make his life a successful one: that means living well, accepting ethical responsibilities to oneself as well as moral responsibilities to others, not just if we happen to think this important but because it is in itself important whether we think so or not. The sec-

17 Solomon 2002, 6.

18 Comte-Sponville 2007, 178.

19 Eccles. 1:2; 1:4. – In this case, of course, a *religiously* spiritual outlook.

20 Dworkin 2013, 1.

> ond holds that what we call “nature” – the universe as a whole and in all its parts – is not just a matter of fact but is itself sublime: something of intrinsic value and wonder.[21]

Dworkin goes on to assert that a spiritual attitude need not depend on any religious beliefs. Religion, he says, has two parts: a science-part and a value-part. While the science-part consists of a number of factual claims (for example, that God created the world, or that every person has an immortal soul), the value-part tells us what is good and beautiful. But, says Dworkin, there is no direct route from the science-part to the value-part. Whatever factual beliefs we may have about the origin of the universe, they will never imply the normative claim that it is beautiful. The fact-value distinction runs deeply through all religions, and giving up the science-part while maintaining the value-part will produce a nonreligious spiritual attitude.[22]

A spiritual attitude, then, will see sublimity in the universe because from a spiritual point of view, the universe is not just a massive accumulation of matter but an elegant, meaningfully ordered system. This is why standing outdoors on a warm summer night and being overwhelmed by the beauty of the starry sky can also be a spiritual experience: because in this experience, one can come to see the universe as intrinsically beautiful. In a spiritual attitude, other beings will also be seen as ethically valuable, and having a genuine sense of respect and appreciation for the life of another being just because it exists is spiritual, too. As a consequence, the boundaries between ethics and spirituality blur for Dworkin, since any moral perspective is also spiritual at its core: it presupposes an attitude that accepts the ultimate value of the other person and their right to be respected as subjects of rights and dignity as an undeniable, self-evident fact. For Dworkin, spirituality essentially means having an irreducibly ethical attitude toward the world.[23] But then again, we mustn’t ignore the dark side of spirituality that manifests itself in an experience that all things are worthless, or absurd: finding a dead bird on your lawn and being struck by a sense that all life is vain and

21 Dworkin 2013, 10.

22 Interestingly, Comte-Sponville (2007, 177) says that spirituality implies the “suspension of value judgments”, but also continues to say that for the spiritual person “all is perfect” (178). This apparent contradiction vanishes once we understand that he means *subjective* value judgments – reality in itself is objectively perfect and lacks nothing and is thus the only thing that has an actual, independent value.

23 Carey 2018, 264 isn’t wrong when he says that spirituality is “a particular style of ethical life” since a spiritual attitude necessarily includes ethical value judgments. But *identifying* spirituality with an ethical lifestyle is too strong because it ignores the other elements of the spiritual attitude that are needed to explain the foundations of this ethical lifestyle. After all, it is perfectly possible to lead an ethical life without being in any way spiritual, for example, if one simply adheres consciously and earnestly to a code of moral conduct. Something more is needed to turn this ethical way of life into a *spiritual* life.

meaningless is also a spiritual experience. And coming to understand the Buddha's fundamental insight that all of existence is suffering, and that all conditioned things must perish is one, too.

2.3 Noetic Quality

A spiritual attitude is more than just an evaluation of reality accompanied by certain emotions – it is an evaluation based on a perceived insight into reality. The spiritual person doesn't just happen to be the kind of person who is filled with awe at the sight of the starry night sky; rather, their spiritual experience is infused with a belief element. Solomon is right when he says that spirituality "is not primarily a matter of beliefs," and also right when he immediately adds that "it certainly involves beliefs."[24] Even though beliefs are not what is essential about spirituality, it's impossible to understand a spiritual stance without any reference to a set of beliefs or propositions accepted as true about reality. These beliefs will typically be rather abstract metaphysical claims that concern the fundamental aspects of reality, like the existence of God, or the ultimate fate of the individual.[25] So, the noetic element in a spiritual stance has two properties: (a) It is metaphysical in a very broad sense of concerning the ultimate nature of reality and the self. (b) It stands in an explanatory relation to the evaluative aspects of the attitude. This is a place where religious and nonreligious spiritualities obviously differ: religious spiritualities are religious because the contents of those metaphysical beliefs from which they derive the spiritual attitude are explicitly religious. But in other cases, it might not even be absolutely clear what beliefs or propositions are accepted. Thomas Metzinger, for example, holds that spirituality is a kind of epistemic practice aimed at gaining non-theoretical, non-propositional insights into reality:

> The spiritual stance, then, involves the desire for a specific kind of knowledge. Spirituality is, at its core, an epistemic stance. Spiritual persons do not want to believe, but to know. Spirituality is clearly aimed at an experience-based form of insight, which is related to inner attention, bodily experience, and the systematic cultivation of certain altered states of consciousness. […] Spirituality is an epistemic stance of persons for whom the sought-after form of knowledge is not theoretical.[26]

Spirituality thus becomes closely related to traditional forms of mysticism aimed at gaining incommunicable insights not expressible in conceptual thought. Nevertheless, the spiritual stance can't do without a noetic element, even if it turns out to be inexpressible.

24 Solomon 2002, 12.
25 Solomon 2002, 13.
26 Metzinger 2014, 6 f.

2.4 Intentionality and the Object of Spirituality

Since Spirituality is an attitude, it must be an attitude towards *something*, or have an object at which it is directed. Unlike most other attitudes, however, spirituality has a very general object. It is a specific, habitualized way of interacting with and experiencing reality as a whole. Thus, we could also describe spirituality as a variety of religious experience, though not as quasi-perceptive experience of a specific object; rather, spirituality is a particular kind of *interpretative* experience: it is a specific mode of experiencing the facts and objects of reality, more similar to a mood like joy or depression than to a perception. Therefore, spirituality is not primarily a matter of individual experiences (though individual experiences may be called "spiritual"); rather, spirituality is a specific way of experiencing reality as a whole in its various aspects: the universe, nature, or one's own life.[27] This, presumably, is the kind of experience that philosophers like James or Schleiermacher had in mind when they spoke of religious experience: religion (or spirituality) as a *subjective* and *individual* experience of the totality of reality, characterized by a particular quality of feeling.[28] So, the object of a spiritual attitude is this: the entirety of reality, both in its objective and subjective aspects, that is the physical reality and the individual existence within it. It is, in the words of William James again, a total reaction of the human being to existence.[29] It is an attitude toward everything that exists: nature, other beings, and also one's own existence within this reality. Spirituality gives the experience of reality itself a particular flavor – the totality of existence is seen through a spiritual lens, so to speak. This attitude (or the particular spiritual flavor of experience) manifests itself in the ways in which a spiritual person acts and thinks, and in the beliefs and emotions that accompany her actions and thoughts.

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27 Solomon (2002, 6) describes spirituality as the "thoughtful love of *life*", using the term "life" specifically to refer to the totality of existence insofar as it is experienced by us (and not, for example, biological life).

28 Schleiermacher, for example, describes religion as "sense and taste for the infinite," or "intuition (Anschauung) and feeling" (Schleiermacher 1958, 28 f., my translation), coming phenomenologically very close to what I am here calling "spirituality".

29 James 2002, 32. In a similar vein, Schleiermacher (1958, 22) says that religion (spirituality) has as its object "the universe, and man's relation to it." Interestingly, James also seems to speak of the divine (whatever it is) as the object of the religious experience: "Religion […] shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine." (James 2002, 29 f.) But I take it that this refers to the noetic quality of spirituality mentioned in section 2.3: James says that religion (spirituality) consists in certain experiences, insofar as the subject who has these experiences *interprets* these experiences in light of their beliefs about whatever they think of as divine. So, not the divine is the immediate object of experience; rather, the relation to the divine *taints* the experiences of other objects.

2.5 The Self

The final aspect ties together the third and fourth: At the heart of the spiritual stance is an insight about the nature of reality and the subsequent effect of this insight on the subject's understanding of themselves. Spirituality entails a radically altered understanding of the relation between the individual self and reality as a whole, and a radically altered relation to one's own self. Metzinger and Comte-Sponville both resort to the vocabulary of mysticism to describe this insight and the altered understanding of the self when they speak of a dissolution of the duality between subject and object, and of a non-conceptual self-awareness. Comte-Sponville, for example, finds the very core of atheist spirituality in a sort of quasi-mystical experience. In this experience, the individual mind opens itself to what he calls the Absolute (or Nature, in a sense similar to Spinoza's), and the distinction between the personal self and the totality of nature dissolves. Recounting an experience he himself had as a young man, he says:

> I can scarcely even say that I was walking – the walk was there, and the forest, and the trees and our group of friends. The ego had vanished: no more separation or representation, only the silent presentation of everything. No more value judgments; only reality.[30]

Like many classical mystics, Comte-Sponville describes a dissolution of the self, and an experience of unity with reality. But unlike them, he sees this experience of selflessness as the essence of spirituality, and refrains from giving it any religious interpretation. Thus, the spiritual stance (in its most extreme form) becomes a kind of view from nowhere – an experience of reality from an egoless point of view:

> Thus, the gap between you and yourself has closed. But so has the gap between you and the world, between inside and outside, between the I and everything else. Duality has been suspended or bracketed – but so, therefore, has the ego; all that remains is everything, and the unity of all things.[31]

Quite similarly, Metzinger describes the goal of spiritual practices as "consciousness as such, attained by dissolving the subject-object structure and transcending the individual first-person perspective."[32] Solomon, too, talks about an expansion of the self – which might seem to stand in contrast to the other two, but actually means something quite similar. Solomon writes:

> Spirituality […] is an expanded form of the self, which is emphatically not to say that it is an expanded form of selfishness. Rather, as many Buddhists have long argued and

30 Comte-Sponville 2007, 156 f.

31 Comte-Sponville 2007, 168.

32 Metzinger 2014, 7.

> Hegel more recently, it is that passionate sense of self-awareness in which the very distinction between selfishness and selflessness disappears.[33]

Elsewhere, he says that spirituality is a "transformation of the self" and that the spiritual experience of nature helps us break free "of the tiny prison of the self."[34] So he, too, has in mind a notion of spirituality that is based on a radical change in one's relation to oneself. This change might not result in a mystical dissolution of the self, but still includes the breakdown of the boundaries between self and other, and a reassessment of the self's position in the world as a whole. The reference to a change in one's attitude to oneself is less obvious in Dworkin's value objectivism, but even there we can detect a radical and irreducible overcoming of a purely subjective standpoint: the objective reality of value which is the essential characteristic of spirituality for him implies the ability to see the world from a point of view where we have abandoned the individual subject with its preferences and interests. And finally, James describes religion as the dissolution of the self in the divine:

> There is a state of mind, known to religious men, but to no others, in which the will to assert ourselves and hold our own has been displaced by a willingness to close our mouths and be as nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God.[35]

The insight that lies at the heart of a spiritual attitude can therefore be best described as the realization of a selfless perspective on reality. This insight involves the discovery that our natural conception of a self, which constitutes the core of our everyday life experience and serves as the subjective counterpart to objective reality, is not the only attitude one can take towards existence. Distancing oneself from this subjective perspective will lead to spirituality – the farther we leave the subjective point of view behind, the more spiritual we become. In its most extreme forms, spirituality more or less coincides with mysticism. Here, the self is experienced as ultimately unreal (Metzinger), or the barrier between self and world becomes permeable, so that the boundary between them disappears and the subject experiences a unity with everything (Comte-Sponville). In less extreme cases, spirituality still includes a relinquishing of the subjective (or ego-centered) point of view, seeing reality no longer from the vantage point of one's own self but from a non-subjective standpoint. Spirituality, then, can be described as a state (or process leading to a state) of an ontological, axiological, and phenomenological reduction, diminution, or devaluation of the individual self in the light of the totality of existence.

33 Solomon 2002, 12.

34 Solomon 2002, 7 and 148.

35 James 2002, 42.

So, if we ask once again why looking at the starry night sky is a spiritual experience, we can answer: because it is a method to induce an experience of the vanishing of the self. If you just look up at the sky and see the stars, there's nothing spiritual about this. But if you then imagine yourself as a tiny speck of dust in a vast universe, short-lived and insignificant, you thereby stop seeing the world purely from your subjective point of view but rather imagine it from a more objective vantage point in which you, the center of your own personal universe, completely vanish in the totality of the cosmos.[36]

If we accept this theory that spirituality fundamentally involves a reduction of the self in the sense of distancing oneself more and more from the subjective perspective on reality, the other elements of a spiritual attitude mentioned above will naturally follow from this central fact. Why do we perceive things as inherently valuable in a spiritual attitude? Because we no longer primarily ask whether they are valuable *to us* (we see value from an objective point of view). Why is a spiritual attitude fundamentally ethical and entails, for example, compassion and openness to others? Because the boundaries between the self and others have disappeared, or at least have become blurry; reality is no longer seen from an egocentric perspective. Why does a spiritual person approach nature with awe and reverence? Because the self, the center of the subjective universe, shrinks to nothingness and dissolves in the vastness of reality.

Another advantage of this theory is that it can explain the similarities between nonreligious spirituality and pantheism or mysticism, while also providing a clear criterion for distinguishing them. A spiritual attitude, mystical experiences, and pantheisms typically all involve an altered relation to one's self, albeit in different ways. The experience of a dissolution of individuality, and the merging of the individual self with God or the universe are often considered essential features of mystical experiences.[37] Spirituality could now be understood as a natural extension of mystical experiences, insofar as they are no longer seen as isolated experiences but embedded in a comprehensive mystical attitude toward reality. Mystical experiences, understood as states of consciousness in which the separation between subject and object is dissolved, could then be seen as experiences of insight that constitute the basis of a spiritual attitude. Pantheism also implies a transformation of the relationship with the self. A central component

36 This is the explanation Nagel (1971, 725) gives, even though he doesn't mention the spiritual character of the experience: "Reference to our small size and short lifespan and to the fact that all of mankind will eventually vanish without a trace are metaphors for the backward step which permits us to regard ourselves from without and to find the particular form of our lives curious and slightly surprising."

37 S. Stace 1961, 111: "[T]he individual self which has the experience must lose its individuality, cease to be a separate individual, and lose its identity because lost or merged in the One, or Absolute, or God." Similarly, Marshall identifies the "incorporation of the world into the self" as an essential characteristic of extroverted mystical experiences (Marshall 2005, 28).

of pantheist theories is that reality as a whole constitutes a unity which is seen as divine. But if reality is a unity, then the distinction between self and world must ultimately disappear and become absorbed into this unity. If mystical experiences are the experiential foundations of a spiritual attitude, then pantheism provides its metaphysical foundation and offers a theoretical framework that allows us to develop a coherent explanation of these experiences. Thus, we could distinguish the three concepts somewhat like this: nonreligious spirituality is a complex attitude toward reality rooted in an insight which can be gained in mystical experiences and which can be theoretically grounded in the metaphysical framework of pantheism.[38]

3. Spirituality and Religion

We can now return to the second question mentioned at the beginning: is atheist spirituality a phenomenon in its own right, or is it intrinsically linked with religion? Is nonreligious spirituality really nonreligious, or is this so-called nonreligious spirituality really just religion in disguise? Two points should be noted before we can answer this question:

(a) The concept of nonreligious spirituality is at least not incoherent. As we have seen, spirituality is best understood as a specific attitude towards the totality of existence, based on an altered understanding of one's own self and its relation to reality as a whole, and it is entirely possible to describe this attitude without any reference to a God, or to religious beliefs. On the other hand, though, nonreligious spirituality doesn't rely on a naturalist metaphysics. If spirituality is merely a certain kind of attitude, then it is compatible with all kinds of metaphysics as long as they don't rule out the specifically spiritual relation between self and world. In other words, if spirituality is an attitude towards reality, it doesn't matter what this reality is, metaphysically.

(b) Likewise, the concept of religious spirituality is neither incoherent nor redundant. Spirituality in one way or another is part of most religions, but religion doesn't imply spirituality. Moreover, in a certain way, it's possible to be a religious person, but not at all spiritual. Spirituality and religion overlap, but neither one completely comprises the other. There is an intersection between the two that is religious spirituality, but there is also spirituality without religion, and religion without spirituality.[39] So, religion and spirituality aren't incompati-

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38 This is not to say that pantheism is the *only* conceivable metaphysical framework for nonreligious spirituality – it definitely is not. Interestingly though, both Dworkin and Comte-Sponville refer to Spinoza's pantheism as an example of nonreligious spirituality in anything but name.

39 Comte-Sponville (2007, 136) gives a similar (but somewhat confused) account of the relation between spirituality and religion: "[Religion] is merely one of [spirituality's] possible

ble, either. While it is not necessary to believe in the existence of a God to develop a spiritual attitude, it's also not an obstacle. But religious beliefs and practices are themselves not sufficient for developing a spiritual attitude if they don't effect a transformation of the understanding of one's self and its relation to reality. Of course, faith in a God can be one possible way of bringing this transformation about: if you lose yourself in God, feel reduced to infinite smallness facing him, or even experience a unity of everything (including yourself) in God, then this God becomes a sort of catalyst for the change in understanding yourself and the self's relation to reality as a whole.

So, the upshot is this: religion is neither necessary nor sufficient for developing a spiritual attitude. Religion and spirituality are neither identical, nor do they stand in some kind of part-whole relationship – religion need not be spiritual, and spirituality need not be religious. As a matter of fact, they often happen to overlap partially: there are religious varieties of spirituality (but also others), and there are spiritual aspects in most religions (but also others). So, *nonreligious* spirituality is not a phenomenon in its own right; but *spirituality per se* is. If the spiritual attitude is combined with a religious belief system, we can call this religious spirituality, and if it is combined with atheism or the rejection of religion, we may also call it atheist spirituality. Religious spirituality is thus just a spiritual attitude shaped by religious beliefs, and nonreligious spirituality is just a spiritual attitude that's not informed by any religious beliefs or values.

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forms. The two can be conflated only by virtue of metonymy or misnomer. They are as whole and part, genus and species. All religions involve spirituality, at least to some extent, but all forms of spirituality are not religious."

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