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# Spirituality and Intellectual Honesty

*An Essay*

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# Spirituality and Intellectual Honesty

## *An Essay*

### Preliminary remarks

We are currently undergoing the beginnings of a historical period of transition that will have a deep impact on our image of ourselves, and on many different levels at the same time. This accelerating development presents us with a profound challenge. A question of central importance is whether a “secularized spirituality” is possible (or even conceivable). Could a modern and spiritual self-conception do justice to this historical change in our image of ourselves and the desire (not just important to professional philosophers) for intellectual honesty at the same time?

In the external world, climate change poses a new and historically unique threat to humanity as a whole. As I write these words, this objective danger is barely perceptible. But today we already know for certain that even in a best-case scenario, it will last for several centuries. Conceived of as an intellectual challenge for humankind, the increasing threat arising from self-induced global warming clearly seems to exceed the present cognitive and emotional abilities of our species. This is the first truly global crisis, experienced by all human beings at the same time in a single media-space, and as we watch it unfold, it will also gradually change our image of ourselves, the conception humankind has *of itself* as a whole. I predict that during the next decades, we will increasingly experience ourselves as failing beings. We will experience ourselves as beings who collectively and stubbornly act against better knowledge, who even under great time-pressure are unable, for psychological reasons, to act jointly and efficiently and to put the necessary formation of political will into effect. The collective self-image of the species *Homo sapiens* will increasingly be one of a being caught in evolved mechanisms of self-deception to the point of becoming a victim of its own actions. It will be an image of a class of naturally evolved cognitive systems that, because of their own cognitive structure, are unable to react adequately to certain challenges—even

when they are able to intellectually grasp the expected consequences, and even when, in addition, they consciously experience this very fact about themselves clearly and distinctly.

At the same time, our scientific-philosophical image of ourselves is undergoing a profound upheaval. Our theories about ourselves and especially about our own minds are changing. Elsewhere, I call this second and simultaneously unfolding process the “naturalistic turn in the image of humankind”<sup>1</sup>: genetics, cognitive neuroscience, evolutionary psychology and contemporary philosophy of mind are successively providing us with a new image of ourselves, an increasingly detailed theoretical understanding of our cognitive deep structure, its neural basis and biological history. Whether we like it or not, we are beginning to view our mental abilities as *natural* properties with a biological history of their own, as properties that can be explained using the methods of science, that can in principle be controlled technologically and can maybe even be implemented on non-biological carrier systems. Clearly, this development is also an intellectual challenge for humanity as a whole. Subjectively, many experience it as a further threat, as a potential insult and what Freud would call a narcissistic wound, a new danger for the integrity of our inner world. It is still unclear whether these new scientific insights also present a genuine opportunity, whether they can perhaps help us curtail the objective problems in the external world in the medium term. But given the global scale of the challenge this seems improbable. It is also unclear whether there is an inherent connection, an inner link between the two big intellectual challenges for humankind—maybe in the form of a single, coherent strategy in searching for the right answers on the level of collective action, or at least in the sense of a personal ethical stance that could provide support on the individual level even if humanity as a whole fails.

At the end of my monograph *The Ego Tunnel*, which was written for a popular audience, I said that in the historical transition that is just beginning, the biggest theoretical challenge may be the question “whether and how, given our new situation, intellectual honesty and spirituality can ever be reconciled”<sup>2</sup>. This idea met with great interest. This essay can be read as an epilogue to the *Ego Tunnel*, as an explanatory afterword, but maybe also as a starting point for a completely new line of thought. At the same time, it is the first written summary of the most important ideas of a public lecture that I gave in Berlin on November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010 at the end of an interdisciplinary conference on the topic of “Meditation and Science”. Tran-

scripts and video documentation of this lecture have been circulating on the internet for some time now.<sup>3</sup>

In the first section of this essay, I briefly investigate what “spirituality” could mean today. The second section directs readers’ attention towards the concept of “intellectual honesty”. After these conceptual clarifications, the third section raises the question of whether there is an inner conceptual connection between the spiritual stance and a strictly rationalist, scientific view. Because this question concerns us all, I decided to formulate the following reflections as simply and as accessibly as I can. But I also want to point out right at the beginning that this simplicity comes at a price: The following reflections are below the level of academic philosophy, both in historical and systematic terms. The concept of “spirituality”, for instance, has a century-long history in philosophy and theology, and my cursory remarks on the ideal of “intellectual honesty” not only ignore its deep historical dimension, but are also conceptually much more coarse-grained than the level of analysis offered by contemporary philosophy of mind and epistemology. For readers who would like to enter more deeply into the technical debates, I will include some pointers to the academic literature in the endnotes as a first starting point. But in writing this essay, I hope that even the weaker and less precise tools used here might suffice to pick out exactly those points that may turn out to be truly relevant at the end.

In the context of the historical period of transition sketched above, the following question seems to be of central importance: Can something like a completely secularized form of spirituality exist? Or is this idea perhaps incoherent—something that on second sight cannot be described consistently and without getting lost in obvious contradictions? This philosophical problem—the question about the inner structure, the conditions of possibility for a secularized form of spirituality—is so interesting and for many has come to be so important that we should approach it very carefully, and in small steps. For this reason, I want to ask three very simple questions in the following three sections: What is “spirituality”? What exactly is meant by the idea of “intellectual honesty”? And: Is there an inner connection between these two stances on the world and our own minds?

## What is „spirituality“?

Even though this is not a technical philosophical text, I still will try to defend the following three theses.

[1] The opposite of religion is not science, but spirituality.

[2] The ethical principle of intellectual honesty can be analyzed as a special case of the spiritual stance.

[3] In their purest forms, the scientific and the spiritual stance emerge from the same basic normative idea.

The argument for each of these three theses will develop gradually throughout this essay, as will the preliminary answers to our three initial questions—as well as, hopefully, a new perspective on the deeper problem in the background.

Let us now turn to the concept of “spirituality”. Is there something like a logical core, an essence of the spiritual perspective? In the history of Western philosophy, the Latin term *spiritualitas* has three main meanings.<sup>4</sup> First, it has something like a judicial and cultural meaning—referring to the totality of *spiritualia*, which are the opposite of temporal institutions, or *temporalia*; *spiritualia*, accordingly, are clerical offices, the administration of the sacraments, jurisdiction, places of worship and cult objects, ordained persons such as clerics and persons belonging to religious orders. The second meaning is the early concept of religious spirituality, which refers to different aspects of religious life and is the opposite of *car-nalitas*, or carnality. Third, there is a philosophical meaning of spirituality, which for centuries referred to the existence and ways of knowing immaterial beings. Here, the opposites are *corporalitas* and *materialitas*. I do not, however, want to delve deeper into history, but rather first want to ask which understanding of spirituality might be shared by many of those people who describe themselves as spiritual *today*, in the Western world. The interesting fact is that after the Second World War, a kind of spiritual counterculture began to develop in Western countries, supported by people who pursue spiritual *practice* far away from churches and organized religions. Today, the most widespread form is probably mindfulness or “insight” meditation in the classical Buddhist *Vipassanā* tradition. This form of meditation

is largely ideologically neutral to begin with, but there also exist completely secularized versions such as so-called MBSR (*mindfulness-based stress reduction*).<sup>5</sup> In addition, countless other forms of meditation exist, many of which involve movement, such as yoga, which stems from the Hindu tradition, spiritual martial arts like the Chinese shadow-boxing *Tai-Chi Chuan*, or *Kinhin* walking meditation practiced in certain Zen-schools. There are also newer forms of spiritual exercises in Christianity, for example in the tradition of St. Ignatius. Many of these practices are characterized by the idea that regular and rigorous *formal* practice serves as a basis for the gradual transformation of everyday life. We now have a first defining characteristic: Most contemporary, live, forms of spirituality are primarily concerned with practice and not with theory, with a particular form of inner action and not with piety or the dogmatic endorsement of specific beliefs.

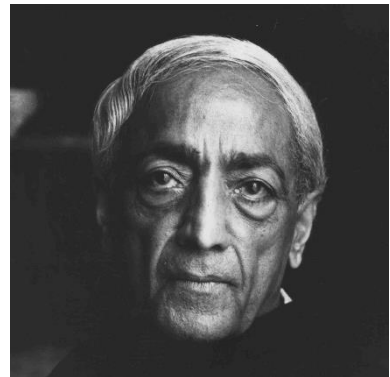
“Spirituality”, then, seems to be a property, a particular quality of inner action. But what is the carrier of this property? One could say, for instance, that spirituality is a property of a class of conscious states, for instance of certain meditative conscious states. However, spiritual experience does not only aim at consciousness as such, but also at its bodily anchoring, at the subjective inner side of what in modern philosophy of cognitive science is *called embodiment or grounding*.<sup>6</sup> The goal is always the person as a whole. For this reason, I want to conceptualize spirituality as a property of whole persons, as a specific epistemic stance. What does that mean? *Episteme* (ἐπιστήμη) is the Greek word for knowledge, science, or insight; “epistemology” is one of the most important disciplines of academic philosophy, namely the theory of knowledge, the acquisition of true belief and of gaining a reliable form of insight (which would be the most direct translation of the German *Erkenntnistheorie*, which literally means theory of insight). A stance is something that a person has in virtue of being directed at something, for instance in desiring to achieve a particular goal. One can say that having an epistemic stance involves being directed at a special kind of goal, namely at an epistemic goal, and that it involves the desire to attain knowledge. 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 al-

tered states of consciousness—but the next step is already much more difficult. When you talk to people who pursue a spiritual practice, for instance with long-term meditators from the *Vipassanā*- or Zen-tradition, it quickly becomes clear that the domain of knowledge, its associated objectives and epistemic goals, the sought-after forms of insight cannot be named in clear and distinct terms. These objectives partially overlap with those that used to be sought after by religions and traditional metaphysics, and, in particular, by the mystics. Frequently, they also involve something like an *ideal of salvation*; some call it “liberation”, others “enlightenment”. Typically, the sought-after form of knowledge is described as a very specific form of self-knowledge, suggesting that it is not only liberating, but also reflexively directed at the practitioner’s own consciousness. Roughly speaking, the goal is consciousness *as such*, attained by dissolving the subject-object structure and transcending the individual first-person perspective.<sup>7</sup> This goal is often related to the systematic cultivation of particular altered states of consciousness. If one reads the relevant literature, it quickly becomes clear that it is not only the representatives of different spiritual traditions who have been debating for centuries whether anything like a learnable form, method or technique of spiritual practice, that is, a systematic path towards attaining the relevant form of knowledge exists. The same classical questions continue to be asked to this day: Is meditation as an example of spiritual practice, a method, or does it exactly involve letting go of all methods and goals? Does it involve effort or is it necessarily effortless? What does real progress consist in, how could one detect it, and are there any criteria for distinguishing illusions, delusions, and self-deception from genuine insight? There is a classical answer, which continues to manifest itself in different contexts: the criterion is *ethical integrity*, the sincere pursuit of a prosocial, ethically coherent way of life that is observable in a person’s actions. At the same time, almost nothing can be said about the relevant form of knowledge itself; it cannot be communicated linguistically or be argumentatively justified, and there is no widely accepted doctrine.

This is very little. Let us summarize: Spirituality is an epistemic stance of persons for whom the sought-after form of knowledge is not theoretical. This means that the goal is not truth in the sense of possessing the correct theory, but a certain form of practice, a spiritual practice. To take the example of classical meditative practice, it is a systematic form of inner action, which on second sight turns out to be a certain form of attentive non-action. The

sought-after form of knowledge is not propositional, it does not involve true sentences. Because it also does not involve intellectual insight, the sought-after form of insight is not communicable by way of language, but at most can only be hinted at or demonstrated. On the other hand, it always remains clear that spirituality is not merely about therapy or about a sophisticated form of *wellness*, but that in a very strong sense, it concerns ethical integrity through self-knowledge, a radically existential form of liberation through insight into oneself; and it is also clear that in many traditions, this involves some kind of mental training and practice, an inner form of virtue or self-refinement. At the very beginning, then, there is an aspect of knowledge as well as a normative aspect, and this means that, in a very special sense, taking a spiritual stance on the world involves both insight and ethics. The spiritual stance is an ethics of inner action for the sake of self-knowledge.



Jiddu Krishnamurti (1896-1985)

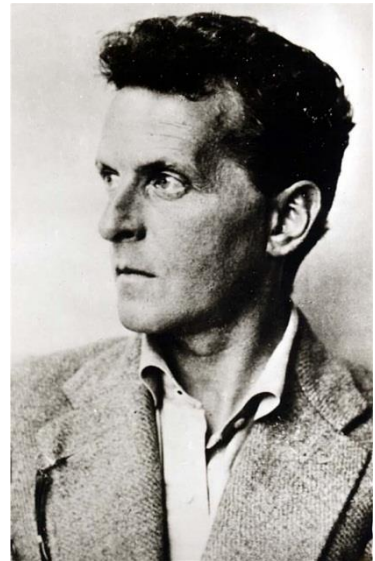
I maintain that Truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect . . . Truth, being limitless, unconditioned, unapproachable by any path whatsoever, cannot be organized; nor should any organization be formed to lead or to coerce people along any particular path . . . As I have said, I have only one purpose: to make man free, to urge him towards freedom, to help him to break away from all limitations . . . I desire those, who seek to understand me to be free; not to follow me, not to make out of me a cage which will become a religion, a sect. Rather should they be free from all fears . . . That is the only way to judge: in what way are you freer, greater, more dangerous to every society which is based on the false and the unessential?

A further aspect that is important for an enlightened, secularized form of spirituality is exemplified by Jiddu Krishnamurti, one of the greatest non-academic philosophers of the last century. Krishnamurti radically rejected not only the idea of a particular path or method of practice, but of any kind of tradition, spiritual organization, or the idea of teacher-student relationships. But if there were anything like a discipline called “theory of meditation”, he would certainly be one of the classical sources, one of the most important authors of this discipline.<sup>8</sup> When he dissolved the “Order of the Star in the East” (which was founded for him as the putative coming “World Teacher”) on August 3rd 1929, he said “ . . . *for I maintain that the only spirituality is the incorruptibility of the self*”<sup>9</sup>, and this is precisely the element of the meaning of “spirituality” that I am concerned with here. “Incorruptibility” is the semantic core of a truly *philosophical* concept of spirituality. If our goal is to investigate the possibility of a secularized but still substantial form of spirituality, then we need incorruptibility in several different directions: towards the representatives of metaphysical belief systems who try to bind meditation practice to a certain type of theory, whatever it may be,



but also towards dogmatic forms of rationalist reductionism that strive to discredit all non-scientific forms of gaining knowledge for purely ideological reasons. But more than anything, we are concerned with discovering incorruptibility *towards oneself*, and independently of any theory or sense of ideological commitment.

But what does this incorruptibility consist in? What does it mean to be incorruptible, especially towards oneself? Is there a form of spirituality that is not self-congratulatory, complacent, or kitsch, that does not involve committing intellectual suicide and losing one's dignity as a critical, rational subject in more or less subtle ways? Is there something like "inner decency", a clearly nameable intellectual quality of integrity—or must we always end by retreating to Ludwig Wittgenstein's classical warning: "*What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent.*"<sup>10</sup>



Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951)

We feel that even if all *possible* scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course, there is then no question left, and just this is the answer.

## Intellectual honesty

Intellectual honesty means simply not being willing to lie to oneself. It is closely related to old-fashioned values such as propriety, integrity and sincerity, to a certain form of “inner decency”. Perhaps one could say that it is a very conservative way of being truly subversive. But intellectual honesty might at the same time also be exactly what representatives of organized religions and theologians of any type simply cannot have, even if they would like to make claims to the contrary. Intellectual honesty means not pretending to know or even to be able to know the unknowable while still having an unconditional will to truth and knowledge, even where self-knowledge is involved and even where self-knowledge is not accompanied by pleasant feelings or is not in accordance with the received doctrine.

Some philosophers conceptualize intellectual honesty as a virtue, as an “intellectual virtue” concerning one’s own thoughts and inner actions, as an ethical stance towards one’s thoughts and beliefs.<sup>11</sup> Again, this involves moral integrity. It means that, as often as possible, one’s actions should be in accordance with the values one has adopted as one’s own—and it concerns the question of *what* one should believe in the first place. Adopting a belief as one’s own is itself an inner action, and one that it is possible from which to refrain. The spontaneous appearance of a belief is one thing, the active endorsement of this belief by holding on to it another. Aside from emotional self-regulation (the ability to purposefully influence one’s emotional state) and the ability to control the focus of attention, inner self-regulation also exists with respect to what one *believes*. Interestingly, infants only gradually learn to control their emotional states and the focus of their attention. But the kind of critical self-regulation involved in adopting beliefs as one’s own is something that even many adults are not proficient in and never fully master. Is it possible to enhance one’s autonomy, one’s inner freedom, by practicing and improving this particular type of self-control? This is exactly what is involved in intellectual honesty. And it is interesting to note that meditation aims to increase this very same kind of mental autonomy – namely, by cultivating a specific and effortless form of inner awareness.<sup>12</sup> Meditation cultivates the mental conditions of possibility for rationality. It involves the inner ability to refrain from acting, the gentle but yet precise optimization of impulse control and the gradual development of an awareness of the automatic identification mechanisms on the level of conscious thought. Thinking is not

about pleasant feelings. It is about the best-possible agreement between knowledge and opinion; and it is about having only evidence-based beliefs and about cognition not serving emotional needs. Have you noticed how the last two points suggest that all of this also involves abstinence, a special form of mental asceticism? And it reveals first points of contact to the spiritual stance. The central insight, however, is that the sincere pursuit of *intellectual* integrity is an important special case of the pursuit of *moral* integrity. More about this soon.

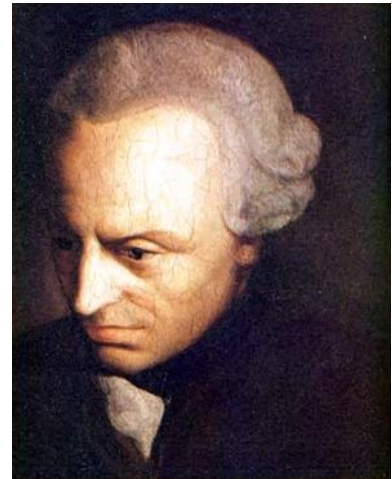
Whoever wants to become *whole*—a person of integrity—by gradually resolving all conflict between their actions and values must pursue this principle with their inner actions as well. This requirement is especially true for their “epistemic actions”, their action for the sake of knowledge. We act “epistemically” whenever we strive for insight, for knowledge or true belief, for sincerity and also for authentic self-knowledge. As all meditators know, there is more than one form of inner knowledge, and inner epistemic action cannot simply be reduced to the intellect or to thought. This seems to be a first bridge between spiritual practice and the ideal of reasonable, rational thought: both involve an ethics of inner action for the sake of knowledge. Moreover, in both cases the goal is a systematic enhancement of mental autonomy. It is interesting to note that spiritual practice is much deeper, more refined and better developed in Asia than in the West. Occidental cultures, in the spirit of the enlightenment, increasingly developed and focused on the ideal of intellectual honesty. Let us look at four stages in the Western history of ideas in order to see this inner connection more clearly.

For the British philosopher John Locke, the desire for knowledge itself was a religious duty towards God: „*He that believes, without having any reason for believing, may be in love with his own fancies; but neither seeks truth as he ought, nor pays the obedience due to his maker, who would have him use those discerning faculties he has given him, to keep him out of mistake and error . . .*”<sup>13</sup> If God really is a person, and one with such distinctly human properties as „intentions“, then he cannot want us to simply *believe* in his existence. He *must* want us to try to *know* of his existence. This nicely illus-



John Locke (1632-1704)

trates the philosophical idea that at the very beginning, intellectual honesty and striving for knowledge themselves still are religious duties towards God. On the other hand, for Locke, this also always involved acknowledging clear awareness of the limits of our knowledge—trying to go beyond these limits (for instance by trying to answer questions about the immortality of the soul) goes beyond our God-given intellectual powers. At the very beginning, philosophical honesty involves modesty. This is what Immanuel Kant would have said about honesty in general: The strict duty of honest comportment is “reason translated into social practice,” because it first creates the preconditions for mutual trust between the members of a society and thereby forms the basis of public order. I think the same could be true for the inner stage, for the protagonists of my inner life (that, as we all know, often resembles a civil war and sometimes even a completely uncivilized natural state, a war of each against all). How could this barbarism in my own consciousness be ended in a peaceful manner? What exactly is required to attain mental civility, an “inner state of civilization”? Maybe we could say that it involves “commitment towards oneself”—the foundation of an inner order for one’s own mind. In 1793, in „Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason“, Immanuel Kant put this point in a completely different, but particularly beautiful manner. What is needed, he says, is *the sincere intention of being honest towards oneself*.<sup>14</sup> The “sincerity” or “purity” of the desire for honesty towards oneself is, I think, the central point. This point also provides the second bridge to spirituality: Now, at the very latest, you should begin to sense that a strict and altogether old-fashioned form of rationalism could have a lot to do with spirituality.



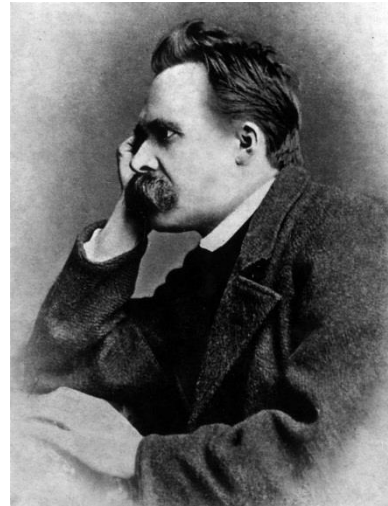
Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

Kant even tells us that this form of intellectual honesty is the innermost core of morality in general. It is, as it were, the essence of the desire for ethical integrity. Here is how one put this in 1793: it is „*the idea of the moral good in its absolute purity*“. In the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), he put this point concisely and clearly: “. . . *man’s duty to himself regarded merely as a moral being . . . is . . . truthfulness*.” At this point, Kant can also explain what intellectual *dishonesty* is, namely a kind of „inner lie“. For Kant, dishonesty is simply a lack of conscientiousness. Lacking conscientiousness in the ethical sense of inner action is nothing

other than a form of unconsciousness, a lack of awareness—a further, interesting connection not only to the spiritual stance, but also to the history of the concept of “consciousness” in the occidental tradition.<sup>15</sup>

For Friedrich Nietzsche, intellectual honesty is the „conscience behind the conscience“. In 1883, he wrote in „Zarathustra“: *“Where my honesty ceases I am blind and also want to be blind. But where I want to know, I also want to be honest, namely venomous, rigorous, vigorous, cruel and inexorable.”* Nietzsche was one of the first phi-

losophers to really write about intellectual honesty, about “conscientiousness of the mind” as an ethics of cognitive action more narrowly conceived.<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note that, once more, this involves a certain form of asceticism, of letting go. For Nietzsche, intellectual honesty is the “culmination and ‘last virtue’” of the Greco-Christian history of ideas, because it leads to the self-annihilation of the religious-moral interpretation of the will to truth. What exactly does this



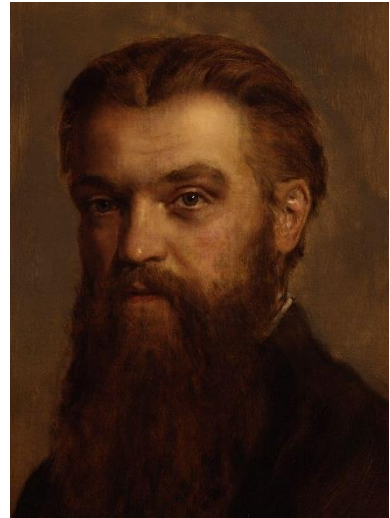
Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

mean? In its highest form, the desire for truthfulness allows one to admit to oneself that there is no empirical evidence of God’s existence whatsoever, and that in more than four thousand years of the history of philosophy, no convincing argument for the existence of God has emerged. It allows us to relinquish our search for emotional security and pleasant feelings, which has been hard-wired into our minds and bodies in the course of evolution, and admit that we are radically mortal beings with a tendency towards systematic forms of self-deception. Truthfulness towards ourselves allows us to discover the delusional and systematic denial of finitude, as expressed in our own conscious self-model. More about this point soon.

The philosophical debate in Anglo-Saxon culture has been considerably more profound, and analytically more clear and substantial. Let us look at the fourth example from the history of the concept of “intellectual honesty”. Today, the technical debate is conducted under the title of *“The Ethics of Belief”*—and this already reveals one of its most important aspects: When is it permissible, from an ethical and moral perspective, to believe in something specific, or to adopt a certain belief “as one’s own”?

The British philosopher and mathematician William Kingdon Clifford was one of the first thinkers to ask this question, and subsequently became the founding father of this discussion, which is central to the distinction between religion and spirituality. His two main principles are:

- *It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.*
- *At any time, at any place, and for every person it is wrong to ignore or carelessly reject the relevant evidence for one's own beliefs.*<sup>17</sup>



William Kingdon Clifford  
(1845-1879)

In academic philosophy, this position is simply called „evidentialism“. This means only believing things for which one actually has arguments and evidence. The philosophical counterpart is something we are all familiar with, namely dogmatism and fideism. Dogmatism is the thesis that *„It is legitimate to hold on to a belief simply because one already has it.“* In philosophy, fideism is the thesis that it is also completely legitimate to hold on to a belief when there are no good reasons or evidence in its favor, and even when faced with convincing counterarguments. Fideism is the standpoint of pure faith. For a fideist, it is legitimate to hold on to beliefs that not only lack any positive arguments or evidence in their favor, but even in the face of strong counterarguments and strong empirical evidence to the contrary. The interesting point now is that fideism can be described as *the refusal to take any ethical stance on one's inner actions whatsoever*. It involves a lack of inner decency. And this is the classical standpoint of organized religion as opposed to spirituality. If one were to interpret these two epistemological positions from a purely psychological perspective, one could say that fideism involves deliberate self-deception, systematic wishful thinking or even paranoia; whereas the psychological goal of the ethics of belief consists in a certain form of mental health. I call this form of mental health “intellectual integrity”.<sup>18</sup>

If you let yourself go and allow yourself to simply hold on to a certain belief in the complete absence of any positive theoretical or practical evidence, then you have already given up on the whole idea of an ethics for inner action. In doing so, you reject the project of intellectual honesty, and on the level of your own mind, you refuse not only rationality, but also

morality. This not only changes your own opinions and beliefs, but causes you, the person as a whole, to lose your integrity. And this is what I meant at the beginning, when I said that intellectual honesty is what theologians and representatives of organized religions of any type simply cannot have. This sentence might have sounded like cheap polemics or deliberate provocation just for the sake of it. But it is really about a simple, clear, and objective point, namely the “principle of self-respect”—about how not to lose one’s dignity and mental autonomy. Importantly, this statement not only concerns traditional churches, but also a large part of the so-called “alternative spiritual culture”. Many of the movements that developed in recent decades in Europe and the United States have long lost their progressive impulse. Today, they merely stabilize or conserve the status quo and are characterized by an infantile complacency and crude forms of intellectual dishonesty. Anyone who is *seriously* interested in our question concerning the possibility of a secularized spirituality has to take all the relevant empirical data and all possible counterarguments into account. In 1877, the philosopher William Clifford claimed the following about anyone who is unwilling to do so by “purposely avoiding the reading of books and the company of men who call in question or discuss” their presuppositions: “The life of that man is one long sin against mankind”.

Three concrete examples:

God, life after death, and enlightenment

Does God exist?

In order to see as clearly as possible what the connection between spirituality and intellectual honesty might consist in, we will now have to be more specific. Let us look at three examples of what it could mean, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to be unwilling to lie to oneself. Let us begin by asking about the existence of God. Conceptually, there is not a single convincing argument for God’s existence in 2500 years of the history of Western philosophy.<sup>19</sup> All known proofs of God’s existence fail. And retreating to agnosticism—as many of us like to do—and saying “I simply won’t say anything about this, I withhold judgment!” is

not exactly as easy an option as it may first seem. This position is problematic because the entire burden of proof is on the side of the theists, of those who make a positive claim without being able to back it up with empirical evidence or rational arguments. If, for example, our best theories and all available evidence suggest that the Easter Bunny does not exist, then it is also not intellectually honest to say “I am an Easter Bunny agnostic, I myself will consider this to be an open question!” A classical fallacy in this context is the *argumentum ad ignorantiam*, the argument from ignorance, which has been known for centuries. The logical mistake consists in the assumption that something that has not been proven false is automatically true. Returning to our example, the classical error in reasoning would be the following: „As long as the existence of the Easter Bunny has not been disproved beyond the shadow of a doubt, it can be assumed as a commonly accepted fact!” We are all very prone to this fallacy for psychological reasons, because it allows us to submit to cultural tradition and is driven by the secret motive of wanting nevertheless to derive a strong conclusion from our ignorance. However, almost nothing truly interesting follows from the fact that one does not know something.

From the perspective of rational argumentation, agnosticism could well turn out not to be a genuine option at all, because the burden of proof is so unequally distributed and because there are simply no convincing, positive arguments for the existence of God. However, there are many different forms of agnosticism. Two of these might be of interest for those taking the spiritual stance discussed above. The first is the crystal-clear *theoretical* insight that all questions concerning the existence or non-existence of God are meaningless as long as there is no coherent definition of the concept of “God”—incidentally, a point that also concerns all those who like to regard themselves as atheists and prefer to give a univocally negative answer to the question. Does a meaningful, internally coherent and non-contradictory concept of God even exist? A spiritual type-I agnostic could say: “I don’t even know what you mean by the concept of ‘God’ and so cannot make any claims about his existence or non-existence. It would be intellectually dishonest to even participate in this kind of discussion.” A type-II agnostic could simply point out that questions concerning the existence or non-existence of God are *uninteresting* and, in this sense, insignificant, because they do not play a role for spiritual *practice*. After all, this practice is not about having the right theory, but



about ending our permanent search for emotional security and certainty by understanding the inner, underlying structure of this search on a deeper level.

Conceptually, there seems to be no convincing argument for the existence of God. It also seems to be quite easy to slip into errors of reasoning or to get lost in irrelevant discussions. But what about empirical evidence? Empirically, and this is a trivial point, there are no proofs for the existence of God. Obviously, mystical experiences or altered states of consciousness as such cannot provide empirical evidence in any strict sense of the word. What is new about the current situation, however, is that there is a growing number of increasingly convincing theories on the evolution of religious belief.<sup>20</sup> Evolutionary psychology is providing the first models of the development of metaphysical belief systems and science is beginning to investigate how the phenomenon of religiosity gradually developed in the history of humankind in the first place.<sup>21</sup> These research programs are part of a movement that can be described as aiming to “naturalize” religion, and they are an important aspect of the naturalist turn in the image of humankind that I talked about at the very beginning.

According to the view that is slowly beginning to emerge from recent research, the evolution of belief had a lot to do with the evolution of useful forms of self-deception.<sup>22</sup> The evolution of consciousness not only led to the development of better and better forms of perception, thinking and intelligence. It also led to the appearance of false, but nonetheless useful beliefs, positive illusions and entire delusional systems, which may have survived because they increased the reproductive success of those who endorsed them, thus enabling them to pass their genes on to their descendants more successfully. All parents directly perceive their children as being above-average in terms of their looks and intelligence. They are proud of their children and claim that parenthood has increased their emotional quality of life, overall satisfaction and personal sense of meaningfulness. By contrast, psychological research shows that parents have a lower emotional quality of life than people who do not have children, that parents experience positive feelings more rarely and negative feelings and periods of depression more frequently, and that their satisfaction with their marriage and their partner is lower.<sup>23</sup> Generally, the majority of people claim to have more positive and fewer negative experiences than the average. Self-deception allows us to forget past defeats, it increases motivation and self-confidence. The conventional view according to

which natural selection favored increasingly accurate images of ourselves and of reality is outdated. Recent research shows that in many cases, evolution produced systematic *misrepresentations* of reality. There is an evolution of self-deception. At the same time, positive illusions, mechanisms of repression and delusional models of reality do not only have a purely defensive function that strengthens the inner cohesion of the human self-model and liberates it from certain negative information.<sup>24</sup> On the sociopsychological level, they also seem to be an effective strategy for controlling exactly those kinds of information that are available to *other* people, so as to deceive them more effectively—for instance by convincing others that one is more ethical, stronger, more intelligent or more attractive than one really is. Self-deception not only serves the purpose of self-protection, but also of aggression, for instance when attempting to improve one's social status.<sup>25</sup> Some forms of self-deception are only truly effective in groups. By stabilizing internal hierarchies and existing structures of exploitation, they increase the internal cohesion of large groups (for instance when confronting other clans, peoples, or religious communities). All these functions are also fulfilled by religion. And this point is of the utmost importance for the question of whether secularized forms of spirituality are possible: The subjective experience of certainty is not the same as the actual possession of certainty. Contemporary research provides abundant evidence showing that, at any time, we may fall victim to unnoticed deception about the contents of our own consciousness. Intuitions have a long biological history.<sup>26</sup> Those who take the philosophical project of self-knowledge seriously must consider the possibility that intuitive certainties may be systematically misleading and that even the "direct observation of one's own consciousness" can always produce introspective illusions.<sup>27</sup>

The new major problem for our species is our explicit and consciously experienced insight into our own mortality. The so-called *terror management theory* says that the process of becoming conscious of one's own mortality can produce a direct conflict with our instinct of self-preservation and hence has the potential for generating a paralyzing, existential kind of fear.<sup>28</sup> We try to overcome this fear by seeking security and stability in an ideology that we use as a kind of "anxiety buffer". A stable ideological framework enables us to stabilize our sense of self-esteem on the emotional level as well, for instance through religious beliefs, the shared commitment to certain values, rituals, and a lifestyle that is based on more or less strict rules and is shared with other believers.<sup>29</sup> Empirical research shows: The less

able we are to repress information about our own mortality, the more strongly we identify with our chosen ideological system.

In this context, I want to introduce the concept of an „adaptive delusional system“. This may once more sound deliberately provocative, but I am not interested in polemics, but in clearly and matter-of-factly stating an important point. Beginning with the perspective of psychiatry, a “delusion” is an obviously false belief accompanied by a strong subjective sense of certainty that cannot be corrected in response to rational arguments or empirical evidence. A system of delusions is an entire network of interconnected beliefs, which can also be shared by many people at the same time. In psychiatry, a delusion is something that diminishes the patient’s conduct of life and typically is a cause of psychological strain—for religious systems of belief, this connection to detrimental effects is traditionally denied (or diplomatically ignored). But on closer inspection, this denial is, of course, incorrect. This is exactly the point: a reduction of intellectual honesty leads to a loss of autonomy and flexibility. Historically, this repeatedly led to political and military catastrophes, to dictatorship and wars. It is true that in the short term, such belief systems can effectively decrease subjective suffering for individual human beings. They are a source of comfort and enable intense communal experiences along with a feeling of security in an insecure world. In a sense, they are metaphysical placebos, put to use in existential palliative medicine. For humanity as a whole, however, this strategy is *objectively* unsustainable. The clear and readily understandable point is this: The local, short-termed stabilization of the individual sense of self-esteem has again and again caused incredible amounts of suffering on the global level.

Why do I talk about „adaptive“ delusional systems? Calling a delusional system “adaptive” means that it is a gradual achievement and fulfills some positive adaptive function. Adaptive delusional systems are attempts to adapt to an unexpected challenge, to a new danger in the inner or outer world of an individual. This danger can be, for instance, the sudden, explicit and consciously experienced insight into one’s own mortality. Historically, religion originated in burial rituals, burial objects, and ancestor cults, that is, in systematic forms of denying our own mortality—coping-strategies with respect to our own finitude. In speaking of adaptive delusional systems, one is indirectly also speaking of mental health and ill-

ness. An interesting new insight, therefore, could be that, especially on the psychological and sociocultural levels, evolution apparently produced successful forms of mental illness.

This is interesting because it is directly related to the pursuit of integrity: Perhaps there are mostly unconscious mechanisms in us, internal processes that corrupt the self, namely in the sense discussed in the Krishnamurti quotation given above. These internal processes could corrupt the self by hard-wiring what Kant called the “inner lie” into ourselves, from birth. Much current research points in this direction. This would mean, first, that we are not ethically responsible for this fact, because these processes were programmed into the functional architecture of our brains and thus of our minds by evolution, from below, by a blind process that has no direction and no goals, and which we consequently were never able to change in the first place. Consequently, we are not blameworthy in a moral sense. There is no such thing as „original sin“ in evolutionary psychology. Second, however, whenever we gain *insight* into these facts, this insight gives rise to a direct ethical responsibility to understand the different mechanisms of self-deception as thoroughly as possible, using all possibilities for their investigation and all forms of epistemic action at our disposal. In doing so, we have to understand that not all forms of self-deception are purely biological bottom-up processes: Social and cultural dynamics—for which we, as individuals, have joint responsibility—can also enslave the human mind from the “top down”, for instance through different world-views or ideologies. It is important to note how there always is a subtle danger of the goal of intellectual honesty itself becoming ideological or turning into a new religion. Those who are committed to the extended philosophical ideal of self-knowledge discussed in this essay will strive to face up to the mechanisms that threaten their inner integrity as directly as possible—and they will have to do so repeatedly and in a fresh manner, again and again. This may be done from the inside, or from the outside.

Is there a life after death?

But what about life after death? Isn't it possible that mind and body are really two ontologically autonomous entities that could also exist independently of each other? Modern theories on self-deception and the evolution of religion are not directly relevant to the question of whether God exists, because all of this could turn out to be true, and God could exist

nonetheless: The basic metaphysical question is not touched by these theories. The analogous question, then, is what, given the current context, is the correct conceptual interpretation of scientific data on the relationship between the brain and consciousness. Given the results of modern brain research, what is the most reasonable and most intellectually honest model of the mind-body relationship? What is the best conceptual interpretation of all available data? In current philosophy of mind, substance dualism is a position that has only had extremely few proponents for quite some time now.<sup>30</sup> In the newer debate since the end of World War II, about nine different models for solving the mind-body problem have been proposed, but none of them assumes anything like personal survival after death to be possible. In modern philosophy of mind, even anti-reductionists, anti-naturalists and property dualists only rarely argue for the possibility of personal survival of death.

And what about the state of affairs in modern neuroscience of consciousness? Today, only very few researchers involved in contemporary empirical consciousness research believe in life after death.<sup>31</sup> In human beings, a functional brain is a necessary condition for the emergence of consciousness. Even though it may be impossible to conceptually reduce the subjective inner perspective to which our inner experience is bound to a complex form of information-processing<sup>32</sup>, it is still perfectly clear that the contents of our conscious experience are determined “bottom up”, by local and contemporaneous events taking place on the level of the brain. Serious contemporary research is searching for the “neural correlate of consciousness” (short NCC)<sup>33</sup>, that is, for the smallest set of properties in the brain that is sufficient to bring about subjective experience. Science is trying to isolate these properties as precisely as possible, and it is making progress. In this endeavor, almost no one believes that sensory perception, memory, thought, or attention could continue to exist without the NCC, that is, after bodily death. The most reasonable assumption is that, in human beings, advanced meditative states have a necessary neuronal correlate as well, without which they cannot occur. In the end, the altered states of consciousness cultivated in the context of spiritual practice for the sake of insight are probably quite simply *identical* with physical states in our heads. Because the brain is a part of the human body, even the objects of meditative experience—memory episodes, fantasies directed at the future, spontaneously occurring thoughts and feelings—ultimately are bodily processes, even though they are not normally subjectively experienced as such.

What does all of this mean for our question about intellectual honesty and the possibility of secularized spirituality? At the outset, no one *has* to believe that all of these hypotheses or theories are true. All of these theories could be false, and as a matter of fact almost all of the theories that have ever existed in the history of humankind have been falsified today. Still, one obviously should not slide into the *argumentum ad ignorantiam* by claiming: “Nobody has conclusively proven that there is no such thing as an immortal soul, so it probably exists after all!” Intellectual honesty is about something much more simple and modest: it is about being honest to oneself and simply accepting the fact that, at the moment, this is the status quo in science and philosophy. In fact, if we want to act rationally and with “inner decency”, we never have anything but the current moment, the Now—and this includes the current status of empirical consciousness research, the Now of science. However, at this point, we can also draw a second conclusion regarding the idea of secularized spirituality. It has to do with the ideal of salvation that I discussed at the beginning: At the moment, it seems that liberation can always only be *intramundane liberation*, and that salvation can always only be *intramundane salvation*. “Intramundane” means that it is something inner-worldly, something that can only take place in this very life. This means that spirituality is not about an afterworld or possible future rewards, but about the lived moment of mindfulness, the moment of compassion, the present Now. If any such thing as a sacred space still exists, then it always only concerns the consciously experienced Now.

## Enlightenment

What about the idea of enlightenment? For many of those engaged in spiritual practice, it seems to be something like the final goal, the deepest insight, the end of all suffering. And of course there are hundreds of reports from many cultures and from all times about such “enlightenment experiences”. But a first point is that, on closer inspection, these reports only resemble each other in certain characteristic traits, but never in all of them: The experiences described by the Christian mystics already are in themselves very different, and moving beyond the Christian tradition, they are also not simply identical with the descriptions given by the great Yogis or Japanese Zen monks. From a philosophical perspective, there are no good arguments for saying that a single, well-defined, culturally invariant and theory- and

description-independent state of consciousness that is “the” enlightenment exists. In Buddhist philosophy, for instance, there has never been any fundamental agreement in any stage of its history as to what enlightenment really is or could be. Only several million people in rich Western countries know exactly what enlightenment is, because they satisfy their emotional needs in New Age bookshops, exploiting the spiritual traditions of other cultures. Large parts of the “spiritual alternative culture” discussed above that developed in the second half of the twentieth century have now become intellectually dishonest and reactionary. This is a problem, and another fact we have to face.

Second, it is important to realize, again and again, that there is a simple logical problem. If one concentrates only on the main phenomenological characteristic found in many reports about enlightenment experiences—namely, the dissolution of the self, the complete disappearance of the sense of self—then there is no reason to lend any credence to reports about such states because they are self-contradictory. If there was no longer a self, then who is reporting such experiences to us in the first place? If the experiential subject really disappeared, then how can autobiographical memories of the relevant episodes exist? How am I supposed to remember a state in which I did not exist as a conscious self at all? This is another reason why reports about enlightenment experiences may not be as interesting as many think. But then again it is exactly this point that also connects those engaged in serious spiritual practice with the scientific worldview.

At the moment, we are experiencing a renaissance in academic and strictly empirically-based meditation research.<sup>34</sup> But so far, this empirical research in no way suggests that a single, well-defined state of consciousness exists that is the same across all societies and cultures and whose objective characteristics could be “the” enlightenment, independently of all specific theories or systems of description. You might think that this will change as brain research progresses and the scientific methods for the statistic-mathematical modeling of mystical experiences improve. The deeper question, however, is: *Could* empirical research show such a thing at all? Linguistic reports, at least, are necessarily “theory-infected”, they mirror the *weltanschauung* and descriptive system of the respective subject. But even more importantly, the component of existential “liberation”—what at the outset I considered to be the ideal of salvation connecting different spiritual traditions—cannot be operationalized

and rendered scientifically tractable because of its ineffability. Scientifically, this aspect can always only be grasped as a completely transient form of *experience* that depends on physical processes in the brain, and not as a transcendent form of knowledge. For our question about the possibility of secularized spirituality, this means that not only the traditional ideal of salvation, but also possible knowledge claims must be interpreted and justified anew. Whoever wants to make any public knowledge claims has to explain what *exactly* the relevant contemplative “insight” or knowledge behind their spiritual “experience” is, what *exactly* it means that certain altered states of consciousness transport a different form of insight that has nothing to do with language, theories, or rational arguments. The most interesting discovery is that this only presents a problem for followers of religious belief systems and traditions already stuck in rigid organizations. A truly enlightened and secularized form of spirituality—and this point can now be clearly stated—would not be threatened by the developments in modern philosophy and in the sciences at all, but to the contrary would exactly possess the potential for their *integration*.

## Spirituality and intellectual honesty

We are now ready to return to our three questions from the beginning of this essay. I briefly sketched what spirituality could be and what one might mean by the concept of “intellectual honesty”. To begin with, a general image of our intellectual history emerges. Historically, the first thing that existed was clearly religion: belief systems that were shared by ever-larger groups of people, that took away people’s fear of death and considerably strengthened these groups’ cohesion. Those belief systems not only strengthened cohesion externally, but also internally, by stabilizing the individual’s self-esteem through the systematic denial of one’s own mortality and by effectively reinforcing existing hierarchies, for example in conflicts with other groups. Historically, these fideist-dogmatic models of reality developed from burial rites, ancestor cults and shamanism. The historically most recent developments were the ideal of intellectual honesty, enlightenment and self-critical rationalism. The ideal of intellectual honesty in this sense is something completely new, something that is only now beginning to be realized in a few places on our planet, in very few societies, and only in its very first manifestations. What made intellectual honesty *possible*, however,



were the originally religious ideals of unconditional truthfulness and sincerity towards God. These ideals led to a turning inward, a reflexive turn on ourselves, towards the individual human being itself, led to the development of the ethical ideals of unconditional truthfulness and sincerity towards ourselves, the relentless openness, the unconditional commitment to the growth of knowledge. However, one central insight, which has always been at the very foundation of the spiritual stance, is that there is more than one form of knowledge, and more than one form of epistemic progress.

Let us begin by briefly comparing religion and spirituality. Religion would now consist in the deliberate cultivation of a delusional system, the standpoint of pure belief, the dogmatic or fideist refusal of an ethics of inner action. By contrast, spirituality would be the epistemic stance focused on the attainment of knowledge. Religion maximizes emotional profit—it stabilizes the feeling of self-esteem, is a source of comfort, and provides the individual with the experience of being part of a larger community, with the sense of security and with pleasant feelings. Spiritual practice aims at direct experience. Religion sacrifices one's own rationality for the emotional coherence of the self-model. Spirituality dissolves the phenomenal self. Religion, owing to its fundamental structure, is dogmatic and hence intellectually dishonest. Spiritual persons will always be open to rational arguments, for they have no reason to seal themselves off from them. Religions organize and evangelize. Spirituality is something radically individual and typically, it is rather quiet.

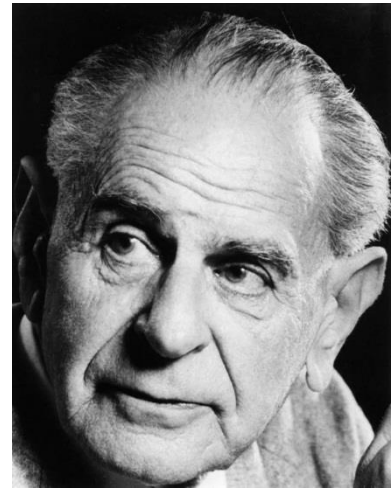
In this sense, it should now be clear what it means to say that religion is the opposite of spirituality. Do you remember the two epistemological concepts that characterize what I have been calling religion? "Dogmatism" is the thesis that it is legitimate to hold on to a belief just because one already has it—pure tradition, without evidence or good reasons. "Fideism" is the standpoint of pure faith alone. In philosophy, "fideism" is the thesis that it is not only completely legitimate to hold on to a belief in the absence of any evidence or good reasons in its favor, but also when any amount of evidence or number of good reasons speak *against* it. One immediately recognizes how a lot of what today appears under the guise of "spirituality", of course, is nothing but religion in this – admittedly simplistic – sense of the term. At the same time, one can sometimes see how even in the large and rigidified religious systems, there are sometimes very small niches or rare cases in which one can recognize

careful attempts to feel one's way back into what I have been saying is the opposite of religion: spirituality.

What about the ethical principle of intellectual honesty as a special case of the spiritual stance? Spirituality is an epistemic stance, the unconditional desire for knowledge, for an existential form of self-knowledge beyond all theory and dogma. Similarly, in science, rational methodology systematically maximizes the acquisition of new knowledge. On the one side, there is the search for direct experience, for instance in systematic meditation practice. On the other side, we find data collection, the principle of strictly data-driven procedure. Here, we have the dissolution of the phenomenal self, there, the ideal of continually and repeatedly letting one's *own* theories fail through their contact with reality. On the level of spirituality, the ideal of truthfulness is particularly well developed, and in science, there is the "principle of parsimony"—the continued striving to make the ontological background assumptions made in explaining observable phenomena as weak as possible and to minimize structural assumptions. Spirituality is radically individual and does not evangelize, whereas today's modern science is a globalized, highly professionally organized enterprise, and one that communicates new insights and research results and hence builds on the systematic dissemination of knowledge, for instance through public media. Still, all of those readers who really know serious and respectable scientists will be able to confirm that these are often truly spiritual people, even though they would never describe themselves as such. Many scientists would even outright deny this claim. Nonetheless, the seriousness and sincerity of the scientist, the radical openness to criticism, and the strictly experience-based search for formal elegance and simplicity are, in their core, essentially the same as the earnestness of spiritual practice.

In modern philosophy of science, there are also examples of the spiritual stance. Karl Popper, the great philosopher of science, stood for the following idea: We are always in contact with reality at exactly the moment at which we falsify a hypothesis; the moment of failure is exactly the moment at which we touch the world. And here is what he said about the fundamental principle of any ideological form of rationalism turned *weltanschauung*: "*Uncritical or comprehensive rationalism can be described as the attitude of the person who says 'I am not prepared to accept anything that cannot be defended by means of argument or*

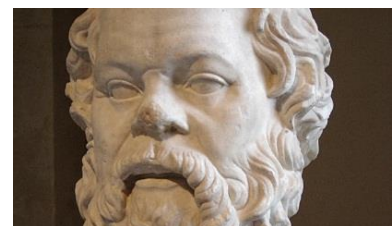
experience' . . . Now it is easy to see that this principle of an uncritical rationalism is inconsistent; for since it cannot, in its turn, be supported by argument or by experience, it implies that it should itself be discarded"<sup>35</sup> This is the idea of critical rationalism, from the year 1958, and of course it is a prime example for the philosophical principle of intellectual honesty. Critical rationalism is a weak and modest form of rationalism, which—especially on the level of political action—promotes the advantages of reasonable argumentation and adhering to an incremental, strictly evidence-based procedure, but is also acutely aware that the individual decision to adopt the rational method lacks any ultimate and decisive justification. Whenever science gives up on the ideal of intellectual honesty, it is for exactly this reason no longer science, but a new kind of religion. I briefly want to remind readers of an idea already formulated above: One subtle danger is that the principle of intellectual honesty could *itself* become ideological. The search for emotional security and final certainties has to be continually given up, as it were, on every level and at every moment anew. The process of letting go is continuous, it has no end.



Sir Karl R. Popper (1902–1994)

We have to learn the lesson that intellectual honesty is fundamental for everything we cherish.

This is another sense in which intellectual honesty is a special case of spirituality. It developed long before science, but after religion; it is a self-critical practice of epistemic action that is not bound to adaptive delusional systems. This practice includes the stance of the philosophical skeptic. After being accused of blasphemy and of corrupting the youths of Athens, Socrates said in his famous apology before the tribunal of 501 Athenians: *I neither know nor think that I know.*<sup>36</sup> The philosophical virtue of skepticism is the ability to continually question the possibility of a secure, provable knowledge of truth, and to do so in a productive manner—the opposite of dogmatism. Skeptics are dangerous, because they are incorruptible, both towards themselves and towards others.



Socrates (469 B.C.–399 B.C.)

For I am aware that I have no wisdom, small or great.

Now we can also clearly formulate the inner conceptual connection between spirituality and science. What does it mean to say that science and the spiritual stance developed from the same basic normative idea, from a shared ideal value? This was my third thesis at the beginning of this essay. We can now see that there are two aspects of this shared basic normative stance: first, the unconditional desire for truth—for insight, and not belief—and second, the normative ideal of absolute truthfulness towards oneself. The second originates in religion, in the ideal of unconditional truthfulness towards God and then in its reflexive turn towards the inside, in which the desire for truth is turned onto itself, to ourselves. Do you remember the beautiful classical concept of *conscientia*, as the higher-order inner knowledge that in Western philosophy is the origin of consciousness as well as of the moral conscience?<sup>37</sup> Awareness is the moment at which the process of insight itself becomes reflexive. In this inner turn towards the process of the will for knowledge and the search for insight itself, spirituality and the spiritual stance emerge, and out of them intellectual honesty—and this then is the essential ingredient of scientific method, of self-critical rationalism. But there is not just a purely conceptual connection between spirituality and science, but also a psychological one. Interestingly, it is something that can never be feigned, forced, or organized. It is what Immanuel Kant, in his work “Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings” called the sincerity of the intention of being honest towards oneself, and what he also called the „idea of the moral good in its absolute purity.“

Still: Even if all of this is true and there are no rational arguments and no empirical evidence for the existence of God or life after death, and if we are truly honest towards ourselves and admit that none of us really knows whether anything like “enlightenment” really exists—what is left? Can the ideal of salvation that connects different spiritual traditions *really* be secularized in a second phase of enlightenment? Isn’t the project of “Enlightenment 2.0” itself just a romantic illusion, doesn’t it amount, in the end, to a new form of death denial? We can go ahead and calmly admit it: Given the current state of affairs in the history of science and philosophy, in the age of neuroscience and evolutionary psychology, and especially given the threat of climate change, it is not at all easy, on an emotional level, to face the facts. Clearly, intellectual honesty comes at a price, it is not easily attained. What can one still *do* in this situation? I think the answer is obvious: insofar as the project of self-knowledge is concerned, our future is open—and this is another fact that should not be ig-

nored—and we simply do not *know* where the inner and outer process of gaining knowledge will lead us. An ethical stance does not strictly depend on the promise of one's own actions being successful. Even if the developments in the outer world should turn out to increasingly elude our control, we should hold on to what I call the “principle of self-respect”: The desire for more knowledge is the only option we have if we do not want to give up our dignity and our respect for each other and, in particular, ourselves. Self-respect does not only mean respecting ourselves as vulnerable subjects who are capable of suffering, of making inner commitments and taking moral responsibility, of being rational. The refusal to give up on the principle of self-respect in a dangerous transitional phase in history also means valuing the fact that we are *knowledge-creating* beings, who are capable of generating ever-new insights about the world and ourselves. This is why one has to hold onto epistemic action, but on two levels at the same time and not only on one level or the other.

Finally, I would like to ask: What is left if the picture I have sketched so far is correct? Could there really be something like a contemporary spiritual self-understanding that respects the changed conditions and can be reconciled with the desire for intellectual honesty? There is nothing to proclaim and no ready-made take-home message, no final answer. But maybe we now have a better understanding of the historical process into which we have entered and of the actual, deeper challenge posed by the multi-faceted turn in the image of humankind. It is now clear that there are several bridges connecting spirituality with science. Most bridges can also be crossed in both directions. For this reason, I certainly do not want to exclude that, in the future, we might discover completely new paths, leading from scientific research on the human mind to more refined, more effective, or even deeper forms of spiritual practice. In the past, the latter originated in the former, because both are forms of epistemic action, of acting for the sake of knowledge. The shared goal is the project of enlightenment, of a systematic enhancement of one's own mental autonomy. There are two fundamental forms of epistemic action: subsymbolic and cognitive, in silence and in thought—involving a specific form of effortless attention (perhaps paradigmatically exemplified in the classical tradition of mindfulness meditation) and, on the level of critical, rational thought, scientific rationality. But must we really decide between these two forms of knowledge? I think that the opposite is true: they can only be realized together in the first place. There is *one* ethics of inner action, *one* basic normative idea that lies at the basis of

both a secularized spiritual practice and the scientific ideal of intellectual honesty. We have already seen that meditation cultivates the inner preconditions for critical, rational thought. It is particularly interesting to note that both stances also aim at improving the standards of civilization, as a *social* practice refined by the right form of inner action. Today, this inner connection could be investigated in much more detail with the means of modern cognitive and neuroscience, thus realizing the philosophical ideal of self-knowledge in a new guise, on a completely new level of precision and in fine-grained conceptual detail. But it can also be formulated in more traditional terms. There is, once again, an old-fashioned philosophical word for the ability and the inner stance that allows one to do what one has recognized to be good not just successfully, but perhaps even with inner affection and joy. This old-fashioned concept is “virtue”. So one can also say: Honesty in the relevant sense is an *intellectual virtue* that can be cultivated over time, just as the inner virtues of precise and gentle mindfulness or of compassion are *mental abilities* that can be actively acquired and continually developed. Therefore, all of this might not be about a new synthesis of spirituality and intellectual honesty at all. Instead, it might be about seeing what is already there: the inner unity of the mental virtues.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> See *The Ego-Tunnel* (2009; New York: Basic Books, Chapter 8).
- <sup>2</sup> See *The Ego-Tunnel*, p. 240.
- <sup>3</sup> I am greatly indebted to Dr. Jennifer Windt and Dr. Michael Madary for help with the English version of this text. Dr. Ulrich Schnabel has given me comments and helpful criticism on parts of earlier German versions, and I want to thank Christa Winkler, Sophie Burkhardt, Yann Wilhelm and Iuliia Pliushch for technical and editorial help with preparing this manuscript. Video documentation of the original talk can be found [here](#).
- <sup>4</sup> A good starting point giving many references about the history of the concept is Solignac, A. (1995). „Spiritualität“, in Joachim Ritter/Karlfried Gründer (Hrsg.): *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Bd. 9). Basel: Schwabe; S. 1415–1422. A recent, concise history of Christian spirituality in the English language is Sheldrake, P., *A Brief History of Spirituality* (2013, Malden: Blackwell).
- <sup>5</sup> *Mindfulness-based stress reduction* (MBSR) was developed by the molecular biologist Jon Kabat-Zinn in the USA as a system for stress management through deliberate control of attention and through the development, practice, and stabilization of extended mindfulness. Parts of the program are also used in the context of different methods of behavioral therapy and psychotherapy.
- <sup>6</sup> A good introduction can be found in *The Routledge Handbook of Embodied Cognition* (2014; London: Routledge) edited by Lawrence Shapiro and in *The Cambridge Handbook of Situated Cognition* (2009; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), edited and compiled by Philip Robbins and Murat Aydede.
- <sup>7</sup> A short and excellent analysis is provided by Fasching, W. (2008), “Consciousness, self-consciousness, and meditation”. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 7: 463-83. A recent collection of philosophical texts on the topic of phenomenologically non-subjective conscious states is E. Thompson, M. Siderits & D. Zahavi (eds.), *Self, No Self?* (2011; Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- <sup>8</sup> The following excerpts from the fifth talk in Madras, on February 1st, 1956, can give a first impression: Surely, that which is spiritual must be timeless. But the mind is the result of time, of innumerable influences, ideas, impositions; it is the product of the past, which is time. And can such a mind ever perceive that which is timeless? Obviously not. It can speculate, it can vainly grope after or repeat some experiences, which others may have had, but being the result of the past, the mind can never find that which is beyond time. So all that the mind can do is to be completely quiet, without any movement of thought, and only then is there a possibility of the coming into being of that state which is timeless; then the mind itself is timeless. So ceremonies are not spiritual, nor are dogmas, nor beliefs, nor the practicing of a particular system of meditation; for all these things are the outcome of a mind which is seeking security. The state of spirituality can be experienced only by a mind that has no motive, a mind that is no longer seeking, for all search is based on motive. The mind that is capable of not asking, of not seeking, of being completely nothing—only such a mind can understand that which is timeless. See *Collected Works*, Vol. 9, 1955-1956: [Conversation 532](#), p. 218; 1991; Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt)
- <sup>9</sup> From „Appendix A: *The Dissolution of the Order of the Star*“, in Luis S.R. Vas (ed.), *The Mind of J. Krishnamurti* (1971; Bombay: Jaico Publishing House, pp. 293 und 296f).
- <sup>10</sup> The quotation in the text is from the Preface of the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (1922; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ogden trans.).The text given in the caption is proposition 6.52 from the *Tractatus*.
- <sup>11</sup>A good starting point is Greco, John and Turri, John, "Virtue Epistemology", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/epistemology-virtue/>.
- <sup>12</sup> A freely available philosophical discussion of recent empirical evidence with regard to the concept of „M-autonomy“ or mental autonomy, which also provides the reader with many of the relevant references, is Metzinger, T. (2013). [The myth of cognitive agency: Subpersonal thinking as a cyclically recurring loss of mental autonomy](#), *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4: 931. Recent research shows how classical mindfulness meditation is exactly the opposite of mind wandering, and it also allows us to see much clearer what the goal of formal meditation practice *really* is: namely, a sustainable increase of M-autonomy. This point also provides the central argument for an introduction of a systematic, but secular training in meditation techniques in all schools and learning institutions: It is about raising the standard of civilization. M-autonomy is the ability to control one’s own mental actions and to act autonomously not only on a bodily, but also on the mental level. We lose mental autonomy whenever a certain part of our cognitive self-model transiently collapses – and new research demonstrates how this happens to each of us many hundred times per day. Perhaps, what Western societies most urgently lack are systematic and institutionalized forms in which the citizens of a free

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country can increase the degree of their own mental autonomy. We still lack a deeper understanding of the fact that it is exactly the mental autonomy of the individual citizen that makes an essential and decisive contribution to increasing the standard of civilization. Scientific research on mind wandering now demonstrates in a surprisingly clear way how most of us are not M-autonomous mental subjects during two thirds of their conscious life-time. It also provides evidence about how this fact finds an expression in a diminished overall quality of life. This is why, on a sociocultural level, we must think about concrete steps to enhance our own mental autonomy. In this context, the introduction of systematic meditation courses at all schools and higher educational institutions clearly is the most important as well as the most urgent political demand.

<sup>12</sup> See John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book IV, chapter XVII, §24, (1996; edited by K. Winkler, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing). Originally published in 1690.

<sup>14</sup> Kant makes the point *ex negativo*, by speaking about the “impurity (*impuritas, improbitas*) of the human heart” (cf. *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (1793; Band II, 1. Stück: 30; for English translation see 6:30 in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: And Other Writings*, eds. Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni; 1998: Cambridge University Press, p. 53). The notion that the special kind of “sincerity” discussed in the main text can help us to realize the „the idea of the moral good in its absolute purity“ and to counter the “corruption that lies in all human beings“ can be found at 6:83 (p. 98). The second thought—that every man is under obligation to himself to truthfulness—is found in the *Metaphysik der Sitten* (1797; II. Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Tugendlehre, Zweites Hauptstück, § 9: *Die Pflicht des Menschen gegen sich selbst, bloß als einem moralischen Wesen*; cf. the English translation: *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Part 2, Chapter II, §9: *Man’s Duty to Himself Merely as a Moral Being*; ed. Mary Gregor; 1991: Cambridge University Press, p. 225). This is where one also finds the concept of an „inner lie“.

<sup>15</sup> Because meditation and spiritual practice are clearly aimed at the right form of consciousness and because intellectual honesty is clearly aimed at a special form of conscientiousness, I want to draw readers’ attention to two points that even in contemporary academic philosophy have been almost completely forgotten. The English word “conscience” is derived from the Latin *conscientia*, which originally meant jointly knowing, knowing together with or co-awareness, but also consciousness and conscience. The first point of interest is that throughout most of the history of philosophy, consciousness had a lot to do with conscience (Descartes was the first to separate conscience and consciousness and to constitute the modern concept of consciousness in the 17<sup>th</sup> century). Before modern times, being unconscious also meant lacking a conscience. The Latin term *conscientia*, in turn, is a translation of the Greek term *syneidesis*, referring to “moral conscience”, “co-awareness of one’s own bad actions”, “inner consciousness”, “accompanying consciousness” or “joint knowledge”, “disconcerting inner consciousness”—early thinkers were always also concerned with the *purity* of consciousness; with taking a normative stance and especially with the existence of an inner witness. Democritus and Epicurus already philosophized about the bad conscience and Cicero formed the unmatched term of the *morderi conscientiae*, the pangs of conscience or as we say in German, the bites of conscience, “*Gewissensbisse*”. Even before Christian philosophy, the idea existed that conscience is a form of inner violence, a way to persistently hurt oneself. I find it interesting that all of these concepts from early philosophy suddenly sound completely different when they are not read from the perspective of the later addition of the Christian metaphysics of guilt, but rather if one reads them in a fresh and unbiased manner from the perspective of secularized spirituality or the Asian tradition of formal mindfulness practice. “Witness consciousness”, for instance, can also mean something completely different than inner accusation, disconcertment and self-condemnation, as a mechanism of inner self-punishment learned through Christian education. It could even have something to do with altruism, with gentleness and precision, with a non-judgmental form of compassion for oneself, and not with the generation of inner conflict. Another interesting idea found in many early philosophers is that agents share their knowledge with an ideal observer. Never, however, was there a convincing argument for saying that this ideal observation is necessarily conducted by a person or one kind of self or other. In sum, the following can be extracted from many early writings from Western philosophy: consciousness, *conscientia*, is part of the conscious person as an inner space, into which sensory perception cannot penetrate; it is an inner sanctum where one can be together with God before death, which contains hidden knowledge about one’s own actions and private knowledge about the contents of one’s own mind; it is also a point of contact between the ideal and the actual person, and in Christian philosophy, this contact is established by testifying or *bearing witness* to one’s own sins. Again, it is interesting to note how “bearing witness” [or *Bezeugen* in German] could mean something completely different, if it is understood as a process that is not conducted by a person or a self and that is characterized by the just mentioned quality of non-judgmental compassion. Consciousness in this sense is clearly also something that we



only possess from time to time, it is something that can always be lost. For the philosopher Christian Wolff, who first used the term consciousness, or “*Bewusstsein*”, in German (translating it from Latin), it is a certain *ability* that has nothing to do with thinking, but with inner attention; it involves the ability to perceive the occurrence of „*Veränderungen der Seele*“ [changes of the soul], and to first of all become aware of the fact that one is thinking at all. In 1719, Wolff formulated this idea as follows: „*Solchergestalt setzen wir das Bewusst seyn, als ein Merckmahl, daraus wir erkennen, dass wir gedencken.*“ [We will apply the term being-aware (consciousness) to mean the property of knowing that we are thinking.] What, then, is consciousness? It is exactly what allows you to realize that you are *now* thinking; and, interestingly, this sounds completely different when it is read from the perspective not only of contemporary research from cognitive science on the phenomenon of unconscious mind wandering. Moreover, every meditator knows exactly what it means to think without realizing that one is thinking.

The second relevant point in the context of this essay is that even in the tradition of Western philosophy, there were not only multi-faceted and deep connections between the moral conscience and consciousness, but also between the notions of prereflexive mindfulness and consciousness as such. This does not so much involve a particular *cognitive* ability, a form of higher-order thought, a conceptually meditated form of meta-cognition, as something much more subtle, namely „*Achthaben auf die Veränderungen der Seele*“ [mindful attention to changes of the soul] – a form of inner attention that also indirectly connects us with the world. Again, this point was already clearly articulated by Wolff: „*Ich habe schon oben erinnert, was das erste ist, so wir von unserer Seele wahrnehmen, wenn wir auf sie acht haben, nemlich, dass wir uns vieler Dinge als ausser uns bewusst sind.*“ See § 195 and § 194 of Wolff’s work, from Halle in 1720 „*Vernünfftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt*“. A good introduction to modern research on mind wandering (that is, on the loss of inner autonomy through the loss of consciousness in the sense just described) is Jonathan Schooler et al. (2012). „Meta-awareness, perceptual decoupling and the wandering mind“, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 15(7): 319-326

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche also wrote of „intellectual cleanliness“ [*intellektuelle Sauberkeit*] and about the „intellectual conscience“ [*intellektuelles Gewissen*]. Further reading can be found in Grau, G.-G. (1992). „Redlichkeit“, in Joachim Ritter/Karlfried Gründer (Hrsg.): *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Bd. 8). Basel: Schwabe, S. 365–369.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Clifford, W.K. (1999 [1877]), „The ethics of belief“, in T. Madigan (ed.), *The ethics of belief and other essays*, Amherst, MA: Prometheus, 70–96. A good starting point for further research is: Chignell, Andrew, „The Ethics of Belief“, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2010 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/ethics-belief>>.

<sup>18</sup> Of course there is a technical debate here as well. As an introduction for interested readers, I recommend Cox, Damian, La Caze, Marguerite and Levine, Michael, „Integrity“, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2012 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/integrity/>>. Interestingly, Bertrand Russell explicitly contrasted the ideal of intellectual integrity with organized religions, especially Christianity. For Russell, all religions are essentially dogmatic; what distinguishes Christians (but also, for instance, communists) from scientists is not the doctrine itself, but the inner stance taken towards this doctrine, the way this doctrine is held. According to Russell, the followers of religions treat this doctrine as if it were indubitable and independent of empirical evidence. Here, again, the issue is intellectual integrity in the sense of an inner stance. But couldn’t the unquestioned adherence to Christian doctrine still be useful, for instance because it promotes virtuous behavior? For Russell, the answer is clear: *I do not myself think that the dependence of morals upon religion is nearly as close as religious people believe it to be. I even think that some very important virtues are more likely to be found among those who reject religious dogmas than among those who accept them. I think this applies especially to the virtue of truthfulness or intellectual integrity. I mean by intellectual integrity the habit of deciding vexed questions in accordance with the evidence, or of leaving them undecided where the evidence is inconclusive. This virtue, though it is underestimated by almost all adherents of any system of dogma, is to my mind of the very greatest social importance and far more likely to benefit the world than Christianity or any other system of organized beliefs.* The quotation is taken from Russell’s Essay “Can Religion Cure our Troubles?”, reprinted in Robert E. Egner & Lester E. Denonn (eds.), *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, (2010; London & New York: Routledge), pp. 579f.

<sup>19</sup> Of course, technical debates in the philosophy of religion and in analytical metaphysics continue; and, of course, there are first-class philosophers who would hold a completely different view. What does *not* exist, however, is a consensus among experts in the field that would point to the direction many still hope for. A

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recent, non-representative poll with a strong bias toward analytic or Anglocentric philosophy investigated the positions of 1972 professional philosophers, all regular faculty members in 99 leading departments of philosophy, and found that 72,8% consider themselves atheists (see Bourget & Chalmers, [forthcoming](#)). Good starting points for those readers who would like to enter deeper into professional, academic research on this topic are M. Michael (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (2007; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) und J. H. Sobel *Logic and Theism. Arguments for and against Beliefs in God* (2004; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). An excellent selected bibliography can be found in J. Bromand und G. Kreis (eds.), *Gottesbeweise von Anselm bis Gödel* (2011; Berlin: Suhrkamp, pp. 671).

<sup>20</sup> A recent collection is E. Voland & W. Schiefenhövel (eds.), *The Biological Evolution of Religious Mind and Behaviour*, (2009; Berlin: Springer). Important English texts are: McKay, R & Dennett, D.C. (2009). [The evolution of misbelief](#). *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 32: 493–561. Atran, S. (2002). *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press. Boyer, P. (2001) *Religion Explained; The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*. New York: Basic Books. Dawkins, Richard (2007): *The God Delusion*. New York: Bantam Press. Dennett, D.C. (2006). *Breaking the Spell*. New York: Viking.

<sup>21</sup> A classical assumption, for instance, is that organized cultural belief systems improve the human capacity for *self-control*, which in turn promotes certain individual behaviors and behavioral dispositions that were advantageous for the evolution of large societies. Such behaviors could have considerably improved cooperation between individuals that were not biologically related to each other in early, ever larger human societies. The following is an example of a recent empirical study that demonstrated a causal relationship between religiosity and the ability to repeatedly replenish the depleted capacity for self-control: Rounding, K., Lee, A. Jacobson, J.A. & Ji, L.-J. (2012). „Religion replenishes self-control“ *Psychological Science* 23(6): 635–642.

My own theory in this context is that what we call “piety” today led to several decisive changes in the [self-model](#) of early humans. When several groups of people compete for scarce resources, then group size combined with group coherence and the strength of perceptible *in-group/out-group*-characteristics are decisive for reproductive success. This creates the problem of how to efficiently identify “free-riders” and other non-cooperative norm-transgressors in these ever larger groups, even when group members can no longer or only rarely sensorially perceive each other. What would be the most efficient and least “costly” solution, even for large groups? I think the solution could be to install an “ideal observer”, but *on the level of mental representation*. This means that there is an *internalized* institution for the surveillance of norms that has a close functional connection to the self-model of every single group member; ideally, this will be a model of an extremely powerful and ubiquitous, but invisible person who “sees everything”. If this mentally represented judge adequately represents the group’s biological interests, this will improve cooperation and solidarity and contribute to the group’s overall success, because every individual carries this functional authority “in their own brain”, if you will, and thus cannot escape it. Empirical studies show that the belief in punitive gods increases with group size and the complexity of social cooperation within the group. Cf. Johnson, D.D.P. (2009). [The error of god: error management theory, religion, and the evolution of cooperation](#), in S.A. Levin (ed.), *Games, Groups, and the Global Good*, Springer Series in Game Theory (2009; Berlin: Springer, S. 169–180) or the discussion following Jeffrey P. Schloss & Michael J. Murray (2011): [Evolutionary accounts of belief in supernatural punishment: a critical review](#). *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 1(1): 46–99.

<sup>22</sup> A good introduction to the psychological literature is: Paulhus, D. & Buckels, E. (2012). „Classic self-deception revisited“, in S. Vazire & T. Wilson (eds.), *Handbook of Self-Knowledge*, pp. 363–378. New York: Guilford Publications. A starting point for the inner-philosophical debate is Bach, K. (2009). Self-Deception. In B. P. McLaughlin, A. Beckermann, & S. Walter (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Mind* (Vol. 1, pp. 781–796). Oxford: Oxford University Press. For those interested in the most important aspects of the newer debate, I recommend starting with Von Hippel, B. & Trivers, R. (2011). [The evolution and psychology of self-deception](#). *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 34: 1–56.

<sup>23</sup> A number of references can be found in Eichbach, R.P. & Mock, S.E. (2011). „Idealizing parenthood to rationalize parental investments.“ *Psychological Science* 22: 203–208. Among other things, they write that „Parents experience lower emotional well-being (McLanahan & Adams, 1989), less frequent positive emotions (Simon & Nath, 2004), more frequent negative emotions (Ross & Van Willigen, 1996), lower marital satisfaction (Somers, 1993), and greater depression (Evenson & Simon, 2005) than nonparents“.

<sup>24</sup> Alicke, M. D. & Sedikides, C. (2009). „Self-enhancement and self-protection: What they are and what they do“. *European Review of Social Psychology* 20: 1–48. A classical text on the development of unrealistic optimism is N. D. Weinstein (1980). „Unrealistic optimism about future life events“. *Journal of Personality and*

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- Social Psychology*, 39: 806-820; an example of a newer neuroscientific study is Sharot, T., Korn, C.W. & Dolan, R.J. (2011). „How unrealistic optimism is maintained in the face of reality”. *Nature Neuroscience* 14 (11): 1475–1479.
- <sup>25</sup> The general idea is that in evolution animal communication involved a frequency-dependent “co-evolutionary arms race” between mechanisms for deception and its detection, which led to a new, more effective kind of deception – namely, self-deception. One central function of self-deception it is to deceive others in the absence of cues (e.g., subliminal bodily signals) normally associated with deception (von Hippel & Trivers 2011, pp. 2-4). Thus, self-deception is favored by natural selection and enhances the inclusive fitness of the self-deceiver. This important point can be found in Von Hippel, B. & Trivers, R. (2011). The evolution and psychology of self-deception. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 34: 1–56. The human self-model (see Metzinger 2007) will therefore have evolved as a *functional platform* enabling ever more efficient forms of self-deception, by distributing knowledge into distinct conscious and unconscious layers or modules of self-representation, thereby regulating *what* information is accessible *when* and to *whom*. As Trivers wrote in his 1985 book *Social Evolution* (Menlo Park: Benjamin/Cummings; p. 416): „Of course it must be advantageous for the truth to be registered somewhere, so that mechanisms of self-deception are expected to reside side-by-side with mechanisms for the correct apprehension of reality. The mind must be structured in a very complex fashion, repeatedly split into public and private portions, with complicated interactions between the sub-sections.” A first popular introduction is Robert Trivers, *The Folly of Fools: The Logic of Deceit and Self-Deception in Human Life* (2011; New York: Basic Books.)
- <sup>26</sup> I briefly sketch what it could mean to say that something subjectively appears to be “intuitively plausible” in T. Metzinger, *The No-Self-Alternative* (Chapter 11), in S. Gallagher (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Self*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, pp. 287. The folk-psychological concept of intuition is not to be confused with the technical philosophical concept. In contemporary philosophy, a new movement called “Experimental Philosophy” has been uncovering the more than problematic role that intuitions play in academic philosophy for several years now. A good introduction is Pust, Joel, „Intuition”. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/intuition/>.
- <sup>27</sup> A classical text is Nisbett, R. E., & Wilson, T. D. (1977b). „Telling more than we can know: Verbal reports on mental processes”. *Psychological Review* 84: 231–259. A newer introduction is Pronin, E. (2009). [The introspection illusion](#). In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 41: 1-67. Burlington: Academic Press.
- <sup>28</sup> As long as it is possible to successively ward off possible fear experiences by identifying with ideological delusional systems and internally stabilizing one’s feeling of self-worth, the underlying existential conflict does not have to be perceived consciously. A good introduction to *terror management*-theory, which is now well established by empirical research, is Solomon, S., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (2004). „The cultural animal. Twenty years of terror management theory and research” in J. Greenberg, S. L. Koole & T. Pyszczynski (Eds.), *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology* (pp. 13-34). New York: Guilford Press. See also: Solomon, S., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (1991). „A terror management theory of social behavior: the psychological functions of self-esteem and cultural worldviews”. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 24: 93-159. Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., Pyszczynski, T. (1992). „Why do people need self-esteem? Converging evidence that self-esteem serves an anxiety-buffering function”. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 63(6): 9, 913-922.
- <sup>29</sup> The feeling of self-worth that is systematically strengthened by the reality models of organized religions is, so to speak, the second level of the fear-buffer mentioned above: as is the case for the outer ideology with which we identify, our feeling of self-worth is, in the end, also a representation of our instinct of self-preservation, a new symbol, if you will, of our desire for existence. We protect, strengthen, and stabilize it with all available means because it helps us ward off our insight into our own vulnerability and mortality. What could better stabilize our feeling of self-worth than the assumption that our own mental existence transcends the body and that we are continually and unconditionally loved by an omnipotent being?
- <sup>30</sup> One can find an overview with many further references in T. Metzinger, *Grundkurs Philosophie des Geistes. Band 2: Das Leib-Seele-Problem* (2007; Paderborn: mentis). I have defended the speculative hypothesis that *out-of-body experiences* (OBEs), which are reported in all cultures and from all periods of history, may be one of the most important roots of philosophical substance dualism and the belief in an immortal soul that can leave the body during dreams, unconsciousness and after death. I think that this class of conscious states and in particular their autophenomenological descriptions, often shaped by religious myths, are the first histori-

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cal precursors of the concept of the “soul” and of the early philosophical prototheories of “mind”. Cf. *The Ego-Tunnel* (2009; New York: Basic Books, p. 85p.) and Metzinger, T. (2005). [Out-of-body experiences as the origin of the concept of a "soul"](#). *Mind and Matter* 3(1): 57-84.

<sup>31</sup> A good starting point is the website of the [Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness](#). An overview of the philosophical debate with many further references can be found in T. Metzinger, *Grundkurs Philosophie des Geistes. Band 1: Phänomenales Bewusstsein* (2009; Paderborn: mentis). More scientifically oriented readers might find Seth, A. (2007), [Models of consciousness](#) helpful, in *Scholarpedia*, 2(1):1328.

<sup>32</sup> I have tried to do this in T. Metzinger, *Being No One – The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (2003, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).

<sup>33</sup> See T. Metzinger (ed.), *Neural Correlates of Consciousness: Empirical and Conceptual Questions*. (2000, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press) and the literature presented in module B 15 in T. Metzinger, *Grundkurs Philosophie des Geistes. Band 1: Phänomenales Bewusstsein* (2009; Paderborn: mentis), S. 528f.

<sup>34</sup> Good starting points are Chiesa, A. & Serretti, A. (2010). A systematic review of neurobiological and clinical features of mindfulness meditations. *Psychological Medicine*, 40, 1239–1252; and Lutz, A, Dunne, J. D. & Davidson, R.J., Meditation and the neuroscience of consciousness: An introduction. In Zelazo, Moscovitch et al. (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Consciousness* (2007; Cambridge, pp. 499-551).

<sup>35</sup> See *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945; Routledge, Vol II; 2013; Princeton, One-volume edition: p. 435). The quote given in the caption is from page 270.

<sup>36</sup> The text from the caption can be found in Plato’s *Apology* (21b). In *Apology* 21a-22a one can find the following line, which Socrates says with reference to an Athenian statesman, and which is often misquoted as “I know that I don’t know”: “*When I began to talk with him, I could not help thinking that he was not really wise, although he was thought wise by many, and still wiser by himself; and thereupon I tried to explain to him that he thought himself wise, but was not really wise; and the consequence was that he hated me, and his enmity was shared by several who were present and heard me. So I left him, saying to myself, as I went away: Well, although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is—for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows; I neither know nor think that I know.*”

It is interesting to note how my point about the fundamental inner unity of the *mental* virtues can be traced back to the very beginning of Western philosophy. The *Meno*, probably one of Plato’s earliest dialogues, begins with Meno asking Socrates whether virtue can be taught. However, this quickly leads Socrates to remark that he does not know what virtue is, and to his asking Meno for a definition. Throughout the dialogue, a number of definitions are proposed by Meno, and they are met with Socrates’ persistent demand for stating the common characteristic that underlies all different forms of virtues, the inner unity that makes them virtuous in the first place. As such, the importance of the dialogue lies not only in the discussion of virtue itself, but in the question of how to find a definition and defend it against possible counterexamples. Here, we witness the beginnings of philosophical methodology itself. And characteristically, the dialogue does not supply an answer, but ends in a classic state of *aporia*, with the discussants knowing what they do not know, thus clearing the ground for true epistemic progress. What we can now see is that asking for a definition of virtue is closely related to the epistemic goals of philosophy itself, and that the state of *aporia* arising from the problems encountered in this process may have much to do with virtue itself.

<sup>37</sup> See also [endnote 15](#).