

# Spiritual as Concern with Cosmic or Existential Issues

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Excerpted from *Intelligence Reframed*, 1999, pg. 54 – 60.

The first variety of spirituality reflects a desire to know about experiences and cosmic entities that are not readily apprehended in a material sense but that, nonetheless, seem important to human beings. If we humans can relate to the world of nature, we can also relate to the supernatural world – to the cosmos that extends beyond what we can perceive directly, to the mystery of our own existence, and to life-and-death experiences that transcend what we routinely encounter. And, indeed, the realms of mythology, religion, and art have perennially reflected our efforts to understand the ultimate questions, mysteries, and meanings of life: Who are we? Where do we come from? What does the future hold for us? Why do we exist? What is the meaning of life, of love, of tragic losses, of death? What is the nature of our relation to the wider world and to beings who lie beyond our comprehension, like our gods or our God?

While human beings may well puzzle over these questions on their own or in discussions with their neighbors, organized systems that deal with these issues have also been constructed over the centuries. In any culture, people may elect (or be compelled) to adopt an existing code or set of beliefs about these issues of ultimate concern. Some adopt a traditional version of spiritual knowledge while others create a personal (possibly idiosyncratic) blend of spiritual knowledge.

Stated in this way, the content of spiritual knowledge may seem relatively straightforward. In practice, however, identifying the content being mastered by the putatively spiritual knower – its realm, truth, value, and limitations – is problematic and controversial. Indeed, having read numerous accounts of the spiritual realm, I am tempted to conclude that it refers to everything: mind, body, self, nature, the supernatural—and, sometimes, even to nothing! This conceptual sprawl contrasts sharply with the domains of science and math, which are relatively delimited and uncontroversial.

## *Spiritual as Achievement of a State of Being*

In considering any intelligence, one must distinguish between two classical senses of knowing: *knowing how* and *knowing that*. For the other intelligences, this distinction is uncontroversial because the content of the intelligence is evident (for example, musical patterns or spatial arrays), and it is equally clear that people differ in their skills or expertise in dealing with the domain.

When it comes to the spiritual realm, however, the two forms of knowing must be more carefully distinguished. The first sense of spiritual delineates the realms of experience, or domains of existence, that people seek to understand. Of course, many communities recognize particular people as being more skilled at achieving certain psychological states or as having had certain phenomenal experience deemed “spiritual.” Within such communities, reasonable consensus exists on who has the know-how; some people are simply more skilled than others at meditating, achieving trance states, envisioning the transcendent, or being in touch with psychic, spiritual, or noetic phenomena. Indeed, some physiological and brain states may be correlated with predictably with achievement of such alternations of consciousness. Mystics, yogis, and meditators are those whose ability to achieve these states – and, perhaps, to enable others to achieve them –is noteworthy. . . a prudent observer might well concede that it is plausible to think of a “a talent in achieving certain mental states” as lying within the realm of scientific analysis.

. . . But the believers or spokespersons for spirituality go further by claiming that spiritual concerns **lead to an encounter with a deeper or higher truth**. According to them, it is not merely the case – as some would claim, the uncontroversial case – that people need to locate themselves with respect to the cosmos and to the

infinitesimal, nor even that some states of consciousness are universally desirable. Rather, enthusiasts argue, **there is a specific content – a spiritual truth** – to which only some or only those who have followed a certain path can have access. And this slippery slope leads all too often to a belief that the world can be divided between those who qualify on some spiritual, religious, or metaphysical ground and those who do not. Moreover, while the attainment of altered states of consciousness can be measured objectively, the same does not hold true for the attainment of a state of spiritual truth. Here, we have left **the realm of intelligence** and moved to the **sphere of dogma**.

Viewed from one perspective, these two forms of knowing – mastering a set of contents and mastering the craft of altering one’s consciousness – can be seen as uses of the mind, whether one considers such uses profound or frivolous, inspired or misguided. **But cognitively-based discussions of the spiritual can prove problematic, since interested observers see the essence of spirit as primarily phenomenological – the attainment of a certain stated of being, what ahs been called a “feeling of surrender” – and not as a domain that involves any kind of problem solving or product making. In fact, some view spiritual concerns as primarily emotional or affective – as centered in a feeling of a certain tone or intensity – and hence, beyond the confines of cognitive investigation.**

. . . In some cases, spiritually potent figures drive people toward exploring cosmic issues. Sometimes, the spiritually effective figure evokes an altered state of consciousness. Occasionally, there is a contagion: People affected by a spiritual individual pass on a reflected spirituality to others. Indeed, many religions have spread by just such a charismatic process that circulates among, and is expanded by, disciples and disciples of disciples. The great religious leaders – such as Buddha, Christ, Saint Joan, and Confucius – are often seen as having attained a level of consciousness, a connectedness to the rest of the world, a deemphasis of self, that represent an exemplary spiritual existence. Clearly, it is the prospect of attaining such a state that motivates millions of people reflecting the spectrum of cultures to strive to achieve a state of spirituality or to heighten their personal spiritual aspects. Undoubtedly, certain individuals exude a feeling of spirituality, a sense of being touch with the cosmos, and a capacity to make those around them to feel that they themselves have been touched, made to feel more whole or more themselves, or led toward an enhanced relation to the transcendent. Whatever the mechanism – and the term charisma captures (though hardly explains) much of it – this “contact with the spiritual” constitutes an important ingredient in conveying to people the goal of their quest and, perhaps, equally important, how they might embark upon the right pathway. But whatever intellectual powers may be reflected in the achievements of Buddha or a Christ, it seems clear that “problem solving” or “product making” is not an appropriate description. **Achievement of a certain “state of being” is more apt.**

**In reflecting on the possibility of a spiritual intelligence, I am struck by the problematic nature of the “content” of spiritual intelligence, its possibly defining affective and phenomenology aspects, its often privileged but unsubstantiated claims with respect to truth value, and the need for it to be partially identified through its effect on people. To deal with this important sphere of life, I find it more comfortable to talk about a potential to engage in thinking about cosmic issues, which might be motivated by pain, powerful personal or aesthetic experiences, or life in a community that highlights spiritual thinking and experience. p. 59**

. . . I think it best to put aside the term spiritual, with its manifest and problematic connotations, and to speak instead of an intelligence that explores the nature of existence in its multifarious guises. Thus, an explicit concern with spiritual or religious matters would be one variety – often the most important variety – of an existential intelligence. p. 60 (all bold emphasis added)