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CONSCIOUSNESS, SPIRITUALITY, AND ONTOLOGICAL DEPTH

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to achieve two complementary goals. The first goal is to outline and motivate a general account of spirituality along the lines of the so-called *perennial philosophy*. From this perspective, the essence of spirituality lies in establishing an orientation towards, and an inspirational connection to, a cosmic consciousness where the latter serves both as the ground of all infra-cosmic subjects and as an ultimate source of meaning and value. The second goal is to demonstrate that one of the advantages of this outlook on the nature of spirituality consists of the fact that it opens up the door for a potential rehabilitation of an important yet neglected idea, namely, the idea that concrete reality admits various grades of *intension*, or ontological *depth*.

KEYWORDS

Cosmic consciousness,
depth, intension,
perennial philosophy,
self-transcendence,
spirituality

"But Thou wert more inward to me, than my most inward part; and higher than my highest" (St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book III, 6, 11).

Introduction

To the eyes of a perceptive observer, the fact that philosophical interest in matters of spirituality, and in the very meaning of the subject, is on the rise should hardly constitute a surprise. Recent decades have witnessed a steady growth in research into pertinent topics such as consciousness studies, philosophy of religion, cross-cultural philosophy, environmental philosophy, virtue ethics, and the quest for meaning in life. All of these areas of inquiry overlap to various degrees with the question of spirituality, and the concept itself is presupposed, if not explicitly discussed, in at least some of their investigations. It is only natural, therefore, that the time is ripe for a more systematic consideration of spirituality as a recognizable philosophical problem (see, e.g., Goff 2023, chap. 7; McPherson 2017; Salazar and Nichols 2019; the present volume).

Yet, there is also a wider reason for this newly emerging interest in a “philosophy of spirituality”, a motive force which emanates from, and reflects upon, society at large. One of the intriguing dialectical features of contemporary popular culture is that it is, at once, profoundly non-spiritual, or even anti-spiritual, while, at the same time, harbouring in its midst a flourishing of interest in various forms of spiritual conduct, beliefs, and ways of life. This spiritual void, the hunger which accompanies it, and the remarkable availability of alternative options on display, have led to the somewhat paradoxical concept of a *spiritual marketplace* (Roof 1999). In such an arena, various players and products compete for the attention and purchasing power of seekers, offering a wide range of goods: from gemstones and shamanic lore; to techniques of meditation, yoga, and transformative thinking; to full-fledged spiritual teachings and religious doctrines.

One of the implications of this remarkable pluralism of supply and demand, of aims, tastes, ideas, and objects of desire, is that the very concept of spirituality becomes somewhat protean – a shape-shifter befitting all circumstances, whose essential characteristics are, as a result, more than a tad amorphous. Whilst it is true that, when it comes to such a concept, a certain amount of vagueness may well be tolerable and perhaps even inevitable, excessive liberalism comes with a heavy price tag. In particular, if spirituality is interpreted in such a manner that it comes to mean little more than, say, uplifting self-fulfilment and a positive attitude to life, then I, for one, would argue that this is an overly shallow conception which confuses certain potentially visible symptoms with the more essential attributes of a true spiritual orientation.¹

Put differently, while the profusion of practical attitudes towards spirituality may well be a good thing, we should not interpret it as a license for an “anything goes” approach in the realm of theory. A philosophy of spirituality worthy of the name must strive to comprehend its subject matter from a perspective as deep and as fruitful as possible. This, in turn, means that it must be prepared to approach the question of spirituality from the vantage point of a theory grounded in certain basic principles, principles which, if the theory is at least partly correct, may shed valuable light on a host of relevant explananda. Hence, while a robust explanatory power is certainly a desideratum, the principles from which explanations are derived need not necessarily be palatable to all individual tastes.

At the risk of offending certain contrary sensibilities which some, perhaps many, may share, I shall therefore venture to offer a definite view on the nature of spirituality, and to base the rest of the discussion upon it. From the perspective I espouse, the essence of spirituality lies in an orientation towards, and an

1 Consider, for instance, this quotation from Roof (1999 137): “Spirituality, I think, is what enters you and lifts you up and moves you to be a better person, a more open person”. Granted, this was taken during an interview, and the interviewee might have meant more than what this selected quote suggests, but it nevertheless furnishes us with an example of a potentially problematic flattening of the very notion of spirituality.

inspirational connection to, a *transpersonal* source of meaning and value. More specifically, on this view, to be spiritually oriented is to exemplify a steadfast aspiration to transcend the limitations of one's individual person in order to establish an authentic connection to the universal Spirit – be it God, Brahman, Teotl, Cosmic Consciousness, the Tao, Mind at Large, or however one prefers to name it and to conceive it. The means of achieving such authentic contact are variable. In particular, they may involve direct revelation, or they may rely on the mediation of scripture, religious authorities, and communal prayers and rituals. The important point, for our present purpose, is the emphasis on the following triad of related claims:

- 1) That the phenomenon we call spirituality revolves around a *seeking* relation whereby one aims to establish an authentic connection to a transpersonal consciousness.
- 2) That spiritual *growth* consists of making progress along this journey.
- 3) That spiritual *realization* marks the terminal point of achieving permanent beatific transformation through the grace of, or through peak experiences of direct contact with, the abovementioned transpersonal fountainhead of consciousness, meaning, and value.

The above characterization is intentionally general. It is my hope that it is sufficiently wide so as to accommodate various distinct stances on the question of spirituality – whether these are anchored in traditional theism, or in mysticism, or in certain philosophies such as idealism and pantheism. The motivation is clear. It is of considerable advantage to be able to point to a conception of spirituality which, while being substantive enough to resist deflation into the trivial and the banal, is also broad enough so as to subsume in its midst a significant array of alternatives.

With that said, however, I shall proceed to present a more restricted angle on the question of spirituality, one which adds the important proviso that the capacity for establishing an authentic connection to a transpersonal source of meaning and value lies ultimately in the fact that the spiritual seeker, and the source it seeks after, are fundamentally *united* in a single continuum of consciousness. It is this fundamental unity, I shall argue, which explains why creatures like us are spiritually *driven* in the first place; why the *transcendence* of self is pivotal for spiritual achievement; and why it is that self-transcendence is constitutively related, in a most intriguing manner, to the capacity of seekers to delve into the profoundest depths of *their own* conscious being.

While this continuum postulate may be dismissed by certain advocates of traditional theism, as well as, no doubt, by sceptics, it marks the essence of a mystically inspired approach to spirituality, often named *perennialism*, an approach which binds the question of spirituality to that of consciousness and, ultimately, to being as such. In the next two sections, I will proceed to discuss and to motivate, in more detail, this perspective. Section 2 provides a concise account of the perennialist standpoint on consciousness and spirituality.

Section 3 complements the account by considering some possible objections to the perennialist outlook on spirituality.

I then turn to concentrate on what, to my mind, is yet another significant advantage of the approach, namely, that it opens the door for the rehabilitation of an important metaphysical idea, now sadly in disrepute, that is, the idea that there is a qualitative *depth* dimension to concrete reality. Put differently, it is the idea that depth of being – or as I shall call it, *intension* – is at least as important, metaphysically speaking, as the contrastive concept of *extension*: the spatiotemporal and quantitative spread, or breadth, of existence. Sections 4 and 5 will cover the discussion of this topic, narrating both the demise of the concept of ontological depth as well as its potential recovery under the auspices of the perennialist perspective on spirituality advocated in section 2.

The Innermost and the Highest: A Perennialist Perspective on Consciousness and Spirituality

The position that constitutes the focal point of the present section is an old one. Possibly as old as civilization itself, which is why it is sometimes referred to as the *perennial philosophy* (see, e.g., Coomaraswamy 1977, chap. 1; Huxley 1945; Schuon 2005; Smith 1987). Its angle on the question of spirituality can be characterized by the following pair of core tenets.

The first core tenet concerns the constitutive ontic dependency of ordinary subjects upon an underlying cosmic consciousness. We may describe it as the *cosmic ground principle* (CGP).² According to this doctrine, all created selves, or individual centres of consciousness, are ultimately grounded in the base-level consciousness of a universal, cosmic Self.³ Significantly, cosmic consciousness, or at any rate the most basic form of cosmic consciousness, is identified as *pure consciousness*, where the term ‘pure consciousness’ designates consciousness as it is, purportedly, *in itself*, that is, in its ground-level state of purified immanence. Such consciousness, perennialism maintains, is *self-luminous*: an intrinsically radiant and clear awareness suffused with a vast oceanic feel. At the same time, the epithet ‘pure’ implies also a transcendence of the structure and characteristics of ordinary empirical consciousness, and therefore marks a contrast with the latter. In particular, pure consciousness is depicted as bereft of intentional content, and as freed from the structural

2 In more traditional contexts of discussing the *perennial* view, there is often a reference to this cosmic ground as *divine*. See, for example, Huxley’s reference to the “divine ground of all existence” (1945, 21). The terminology offered on the present occasion is intentionally less involved, but the general logic of the view is preserved.

3 In previous work (Shani 2015; Shani 2022) I argued that the relation between cosmic consciousness and the consciousness of created beings is more accurately described as *partial grounding*. However, none of this makes much difference in the present context.

limitations imposed by individual egos and their partial, self-centred, and object-oriented perspectives on things.⁴

To return to the main point, however, the idea behind CGP is that empirical subjects arise *within* cosmic consciousness as temporarily constructed ego structures of limited scope and depth. Each such self is, thus, a bubble-like abode of phenomenal consciousness, experiencing itself as the centre of a continuous stream of experience, the “I”, while confronting the rest of reality as “others”, namely, as possible objects of presentation in one’s stream of consciousness, capable of imposing constraints upon one’s field of action as well as upon the quality, and even the very continuity, of one’s existence.⁵ In short, ordinary selves are bounded pockets of ongoing private experience, endowed with a unique partial view on things and motivated by their own impressions, drives, inclinations, desires, needs, beliefs, convictions, and so on.

At the same time, all selves are ultimately united at the core. For, on this view, they all originate in, and are immanently sustained by, a single noumenal Self. To make the point clearer, the idea is that, deep down, far beyond the familiar streams of ordinary subjective experience, all restricted selves share a *single* transcendental *centre* of subjectivity, which centre is none other than the pure, universal consciousness of the one cosmic Self.

The second core tenet may be called the *spiritual realization* principle (SRP). It holds that the ultimate expression of spiritual achievement consists in the revelatory *union* of one’s limited self with the unlimited cosmic Self. In other words, from this point of view, the highest act of spiritual realization consists in transcending the boundaries of one’s egocentric consciousness and entering the inner sanctum of the unitive consciousness of the cosmic Self, which, as mentioned above, lies at the very core of one’s own being. The discovery that one’s innermost nature, the “citadel in the soul” (Meister Eckhart, 2009, Sermon 8, 81) is one with the cosmic Self, or the Ātman, is enshrined in the famous Sanskrit phrase “tat tvam asi”, “that thou art” (*Chândogya Upanishad*, 6.9.4), as well as in the assertion that “he, my self within the heart, is that *Brahman*” (*Chândogya Upanishad*, 3.14.4).⁶

4 For more on pure consciousness see Albahari (2019); Forman (1990); Gupta (2003: 106); Metzinger (2020), and Shani (2024). Significantly, on my understanding, pure consciousness does not imply the absence of *selfhood* as such, for where there is consciousness (however non-ordinary!) there is *that-which-is-conscious* (for a strong advocacy of this conviction see Strawson 2024; for the contrary view see Albahari 2019, and Garfield 2022).

5 Noticeably, the description above ignores the important phenomenological distinction between the perception of others as *co-subjects* and the perception of others as mere objects (in particular, inanimate objects). Although important in general, this distinction plays no significant role in the present discussion.

6 I should stress, in passing, that, on the present occasion, I consider the perennial view only insofar as it bears directly on the question of *spirituality*. A systematic account of the perennial perspective, *per se*, is likely to stress certain points in addition to those on which I focus here. That said, my account bears certain striking similarities to Albahari’s recent analysis (2024: 4-5). Nevertheless, there is one significant point on

From these two fundamental principles, several interesting deductions can be made. First, the perennial perspective offers a clear and intuitive answer to the question of *what* is spirituality. As Huston Smith explains (1992: 87), in many spiritual traditions the infinite cosmic self is identified as *Spirit* (or as one with Spirit). Thus, from the perennial standpoint, spirituality consists of a concerted effort, collective or individual, to draw one's heart and mind, one's thoughts and actions, closer to Spirit. Whether ultimate spiritual realization is achieved or not, the spiritual path is the path of striving – passionately, honestly, and persistently – to draw near to Spirit, transforming oneself in the process.⁷

Second, the perennial view also offers an informative explanation for the very existence in us of a primal spiritual impulse. It lies in our basic predicament of existential *incompleteness*. We are, essentially, fragments, temporarily abstracted from the whole to which we fundamentally belong. And because of that, we carry within ourselves a sense of privation, and a yearning (however deemed sighted and compromised as it may often be in practice) for self-transcendence which, ultimately, is a longing for a reunion with our native cosmic ground.

This motif is superbly articulated in Plato's discussion of Eros in the *Symposium*, in particular as conveyed in Socrates' speech (which, in turn, relates the words of the seeress Diotima). The insight which Plato's notion of Eros captures so well is that the human predicament is that of restless suspension between heaven and earth, between "wealth" and "poverty".⁸ In other words, that we are driven by an inherent sense of incompleteness and a primal impetus to seek completion through self-transcendence (poverty being a symbol of want and insufficiency). The erotic drive, the impetus that moves the philosophically minded in their quest for the true, the good, and the beautiful is, in essence, a striving for wholeness and completion.⁹ The path taken along this quest, and the distance covered, depend, of course, on the particularities of personal and social circumstances, and Plato makes it very clear that there are substantive qualitative differences between those whose nature is coarse and those who are more attuned to the life of the spirit. But all are united in being incomplete and in seeking (knowingly or unknowingly, wisely or foolishly) greater completion. The erotic impulse is, therefore, "the impulse of man's

which our respective accounts differ. Albahari associates the perennial standpoint with the notion that ordinary selves, as well as the objects they perceive and interact with, are ultimately *illusory* (following the lead of Advaita Vedānta). My own interpretation of the perennial view carries no such illusory connotations (for a critique of Albahari's stance on perennialism see Medhananda 2022, chap. 10, sec. 5).

⁷ For a concise and interesting genealogy of the term 'spirituality' see Huss (2014).

⁸ *Eros* is said to be born out of the nuptial unity of wealth and poverty (1871/2018: 203).

⁹ Needless to say, for Plato, as for so many other ancient philosophers, philosophy was not merely a theoretical inquiry into the nature of reality but also a *way of life*, with ethical as well as spiritual implications. The point is vigorously stressed by Pierre Hadot, as evidenced, for example, in his book *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (2002).

higher nature towards the good and virtue” (Copleston, 1962/1993: 198); “the “pull” of all things to actualize their own highest potential” (Wilber 1995: 356); or, in the words of A.N. Whitehead, “the urge towards the realization of ideal perfection” (1933/1967: 275).

Ultimately, however, the Platonic narrative of erotic ascent reaches its climax in an ecstatic apprehension of divine absolute beauty, which, at the same time, is absolute goodness and absolute being. Hence, as mentioned above, the final goal and the uppermost achievement of self-transcendence is a reunion with our native cosmic ground. Consequently, although, as we have just seen, the erotic impulse is often described as directed towards the realization of one’s loftiest nature, one’s greatest potential, or one’s ideal perfection, such realization is, as a matter of fact, none other than the realization of our unity with the ground of all things.

So far, I have argued that the spiritual drive is a drive away from the agony of fragmentation and separation, and towards wholeness and wholesomeness realized through the transcendence of self and the alignment with Spirit. Metaphorically, self-transcendence conveys the idea of moving upwards – surpassing, climbing, or ascending – which is why in the *Phaedrus*, another dialogue in which Eros is discussed, Plato refers to him as the “winged one”.¹⁰ Yet, as should be clear by now, from the perennial viewpoint, self-transcendence is not merely a *going-beyond* but also a *going-within*. Since, from this perspective, that which constitutes the ultimate ground of all things is also the ultimate ground of subjectivity and selfhood: it lies at the innermost core of one’s individual subjective existence, while, at the same time, transcending all finite forms of consciousness. In short, from the perennial standpoint, spiritual *orientation* is simultaneously an inward and an upward affair. The way *in*, towards the deepest recesses of one’s conscious being, is the way *up*, towards a transcendence of self, because Spirit itself is both immanent and transcendent: undergirding and permeating all things, while, at the same time, surpassing them. Or as Eckhart puts it “And when I say the innermost then I mean the highest, and when I say the highest, I mean the innermost part of the soul” (1994: 123).

A Commentary on Two Objections to the Perennial View on Spirituality

While the perennial view offers a substantive and informative outlook on the question of spirituality, one could easily identify certain concerns that critics are likely to raise against this particular conception of the matter. In the present section, I address two critical regards which readily come to mind.

One charge likely to be directed against the perennial approach is that the account of spirituality it offers is too narrow to do this venerable subject matter proper justice. In particular, it may be objected that it is wrong to conceive of spirituality as being necessarily tethered to the idea of standing in proper

¹⁰ See *Phaedrus*: 252.

relationship to a *transpersonal* source of meaning and value. The postulation of such relationships, it may be argued, ties spirituality to mystical and religious conceptions of reality, thereby excluding from consideration expressions of spirituality which may be more secular in character and alienating those who are neither mystically nor religiously inclined.

To make the point more directly one might reference various phenomena which could be conceived, with good reason, as authentic expressions of spirituality yet, arguably, do not necessitate coming into contact with a transpersonal consciousness. Among such phenomena one might consider, for example, being engulfed in the grand beauty of a natural landscape; feeling a sense of awe in front of a boulder, a giant tree, or a masterful work of art; experiencing a sense of the sublime; undergoing a psychedelically-induced euphoric expansion of mind; or the ecstatic immersion resulting, at times, from sexual union. All of these varied types of experience, one might argue, are available to atheists and naturalists as much as they are available to mystics and to followers of religious faiths.

The problem with this objection, however, is that it overlooks the fact that the perennial view can fully accommodate such phenomena. The types of experience mentioned above seem to exhibit certain remarkable characteristics such as a sense of immersion in the moment and in the present situation; an attenuation of one's normal sense of self and of the boundaries between oneself and one's surrounding; being in the presence of something vast which defies one's expectations and conventional understanding of the world; temporary, yet dramatic modifications to one's characteristic patterns of thought, perception, and imagery; and perhaps certain other similar attributes. Such attributes, however, are indicative of at least some measure of self-transcendence, and they are often identified as stepping stones on the path of seeking realization through union with the cosmic ground of being.¹¹ In other words, the perennial view is entirely consistent with such experiences, and can readily acknowledge their existence as well as their spiritual relevance.

Moreover, it goes without saying that the perennial view does not deny that one might pursue, as well as undergo, experiences that are spiritual in character without adhering to the perennial perspective regarding the nature of such experiences. Doubtlessly, one might be awestruck, experience the sublime, or lose oneself in the beauty of a natural scene without *interpreting* such experiences as being related, in any shape and form, to a transpersonal source of meaning, value, beauty, and goodness. Certain experiences are spiritual in nature, regardless of the precise convictions and interpretative tools of the

11 To mention a few examples: tantric rituals use sexual intimacy as a vehicle for achieving transcendence (see Maliszewski et. Al. 2011); shamanism resorts to various practices such as exhaustive dancing, rhythmic chanting, and sensory deprivation (Winkelman 2010); while the use of psychoactive substances (peyote, ayahuasca, psilocybin and many others) is, or has been, prevalent in many cultures in connection with spiritual practices of religious and mystical orientation (Diaz 2010).

individuals harboring them. No proponent of the perennial view should deny this truism. Therefore, the charge that the perennial standpoint is overly exclusive and fails to accommodate important types of spirituality appears to me to be ill-founded.

That said, it is of course true that the perennial view imposes certain constraints on our understanding of the nature of spiritual experiences. For example, it implies that some types of spiritual experience are more profound than others (in correlation with the “distance” to which they carry us towards union with the ground of being); that attaining a profound form of spiritual realization is far more likely to occur with proper training; that, contrary to superficial appearance, nature-invoked spiritual experiences (such as awe, immersion in the moment, and a sense of the sublime) truly are related to the existence of transpersonal consciousness, and so on.

Needless to say, while such claims ought to be properly motivated, they are, in any event, unlikely to draw universal consent. However, such is the lot of *any* substantive theory: it provides *explanations* for widely accepted facts, explanations which may not be as widely accepted as the facts themselves, and may be resisted by some parties involved in the relevant ongoing debate.¹² The perennial view is no exception, and like all theoretical perspectives we should judge it by the scope, depth, and fecundity of its explanatory schemes. Thus, in the absence of compelling reasons to conclude that the experiences discussed in this section are strictly incompatible with the perennial view, the mere claim that such experiences are spiritual in nature, and that they can be had by individuals who care little for the perennial standpoint, poses no insurmountable difficulty.¹³

Before closing this critical interlude, I would like to briefly address a well-known critique of the perennial view, a critique whose mentioning is virtually unavoidable whenever perennialism itself is mentioned in a positive light. I’m referring, of course, to Steven Katz’s critique, in his influential article ‘Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism’ (1978). Katz challenges the very idea of a *perennial philosophy*, namely, of a worldview based on the presumed validity and universal content of mystical experiences. The argument builds heavily on the alleged variety of mystical experiences across different cultures, and on the substantive degree to which such experiences are shaped by diverse cultural factors. Katz’ argument stimulated a lively debate which continues to the present day.¹⁴ My purpose, here, is not to provide yet another detailed as-

12 This rule is especially applicable when it comes to theories, or to general outlooks, concerned with *mind* and with *human nature*. While certain theories in the natural sciences command near consensus for a period of time, this is hardly ever the case in the realm of human affairs.

13 I thank Geoffrey Lee for a stimulating conference exchange which sparked some of these thoughts. I should note, however, that since the exchange was verbal and happened some time ago, I do not wish to imply that Geoff’s concerns are reflected here accurately.

14 For some reactions to Katz see Forman 1990; Hick 1989; Huston Smith 1987; Kukla and Walmsley 2004; Maharaj 2018, chap. 5; Marshall 2005, chap. 6.

assessment of Katz' critique but, rather, to point to its limited relevance to the position defended in the present paper.

One important line in Katz' critique consists in challenging the claim that mystical experiences across varied times, places, and cultures, are essentially identical in respect of their nature and content. Against such monism, Katz advocates a *pluralism* according to which "[t]ypes of mystical experiences and reports of the experiences are specific to traditions and sub-traditions" (Marshall 2005, 182). Significantly, however, such pluralism need not threaten the position on the nature of spirituality identified in the current paper as the "perennial view". In the context of the present paper, this view was articulated in terms of the *cosmic ground principle* (CGP), and the *spiritual realization principle* (SRP) – making no further comments regarding the nature of mystical experiences, or concerning reports of such experiences.¹⁵ CGP, recall, consists of the idea that all individual centres of consciousness are ultimately grounded in the base-level consciousness of a universal, cosmic Self; while SRP proclaims that the ultimate expression of spiritual achievement consists in a revelatory union of one's limited self with the unlimited cosmic Self. To my judgment, none of these principles necessitate taking a decisive position on the pluralism debate. It is perfectly possible to affirm both principles while acknowledging various symbolic and phenomenological differences in the mystical experiences of Advaitins, Sufis, Zen Buddhists, or Christian mystics.

There is, nonetheless, a more radical line of argument which could be drawn from the constructivism defended by Katz and others. According to this line, it is utterly impossible to come to *direct* contact with a transpersonal source of meaning and value because humans are, necessarily, enveloped by the mediating particularities of their cultural settings.¹⁶ If this were the case, if there really isn't any possibility of genuine transcendence and a union with the ground of all things, then the position defended here is, of course, in dire straits, as is any appeal to the epistemic authority of mystical revelation. However, this radical form of constructivism – with its utter dismissal of the possibility of transcendence, notwithstanding historical and personal evidence – is far more controversial than the argument for pluralism per se, and I, for one, see little reason to be much alarmed by it.

15 While my treatment of the perennial view is partial, focusing only on its direct stance on the question of spirituality, it may be worth referencing Huston Smith's claim that key advocates of the perennial philosophy, such as Frithjof Schuon and Aldus Huxley did not conceive of their position in the strictly monolithic terms targeted for criticism by Katz (Smith 1987: 554).

16 Katz himself seems to remain *agnostic* concerning the possibility that mystical experiences convey perceptual knowledge of a transcendent reality, but others have taken a more radical skeptical line. For discussion see Maharaj (2018, chap. 5), and Marshall (2005, chap. 6).

Depth of Being and the Flattening of Reality

Having outlined a general account of spirituality, at the core of which lies the idea of standing in appropriate relations to a cosmic consciousness, I would like, next, to draw attention to a significant if under-appreciated aspect of such an account, namely, that it paves the way to a rehabilitation of the concept of ontological *depth*. In the present section, I focus on clarifying and motivating this idea: commenting on its history, decline, and potential resurrection.

As seen earlier, the perennial standpoint ties spiritual progress to the paradoxically sounding idea that the key to the *transcendence* of one's limited egoc self lies in delving deep into the furthestmost recesses of one's private consciousness. For it is assumed that there, at the very core of one's being, lies the Atman or universal Self: "greater than the earth, greater than the sky, greater than heaven, greater than all these worlds" (*Chândogya Upanishad*, 3.14.3). The paradox is resolved when we remind ourselves of the cosmic ground principle, namely, that behind all particular selves lies a universal cosmic Self, whose selfhood – unlimited in its depths of existence – is their ultimate ground and centre. The way *in* (to the centre of one's being) is the way *up* (towards self-surpassing) precisely because bounded selves are anchored in the unbounded existence of a transpersonal cosmic Self.¹⁷

Given such a perspective on the matter at hand, however, it follows that there is a graded *continuum* of consciousness and subjective existence. For if, by plunging into the private depths of one's own being, it is possible to come into contact with more profound levels of subjectivity, transpersonal in character, then the underlying picture, no doubt, is that of a layered *hierarchy* of heights, or depths, of conscious existence. More informatively, the idea is that cosmic consciousness is endowed with unfathomable depths of subjectivity, and that, with concerted effort or by sheer grace, spiritual seekers might tap into this inexhaustible reservoir, transcending the limited boundaries of their ordinary selves and reaching a heightened level of consciousness.¹⁸

That the perennial view entails such a graded picture of consciousness is not in the least surprising. However, we should bear in mind that since, on this view, consciousness is the ultimate foundation of reality, the depth of consciousness amounts, also, to the *depth of being*. Now, the idea that concrete reality could be meaningfully characterized by a dimension of depth is anything but trivial. For it is one of a number of ideas which were central to pre-modern

17 For a more comprehensive discussion of the subtleties involved in the idea that infra-cosmic selves are grounded in cosmic consciousness see Shani (2015); Shani and Keppler (2018); Shani (2022).

18 When it comes to the differences between various created beings, say different species of organisms, the perennial view maintains that these, too, differ with respect to the characteristic depth, or intensity, of their consciousness. Naturally, such differences are explained in terms of the capacity of each type, and of each individual within a given type, to partake in the inexhaustible depth of the cosmic "reservoir".

western philosophy but went largely out of favor with the rise of the modern era.¹⁹ Its potential rehabilitation is, therefore, I think, of considerable interest.

Today, we live in a world in which the idea of ontological depth, the depth of being, is bound to be met with suspicion if not downright scorn and ridicule. As Ken Wilber stresses, the dominant ontologies of the modern age, down to the present, are *flatland* ontologies (2000, 70). They strive to characterize reality in purely objective terms, that is, in terms of empirically discoverable patterns of matter/energy. Evidently, such endeavor implies a reduction of the inner, subjective dimension of reality to outer, objective appearances. However, as many critics have stressed over the years, since *observables* (i.e., the discoverable patterns mentioned above) presuppose the reality of *observers*, and since *observations*, which constitute the meeting points of these two complementary terms, lie at the very hub of the scientific enterprise itself – the ideal of a purely objective world is of dubious coherence. Put differently, a scientifically-based notion of objectivity is one in which subjectivity inevitably plays a key role.²⁰

That said, the main point, insofar as our present topic is concerned, is that such an “objectivist” reduction collapses reality into its observable *exteriors*. The world is effectively identified with its external appearances, namely, with observable phenomena available to third-person scrutiny. The inner, subjective dimension of things, hidden from public view, is denied a place in the true makeup of reality. The result is a world with no place for interiority. A world of surfaces upon surfaces, without a center or core. A world characterized by spatiotemporal spread but no mental strain, breadth but no depth, extension but no intension. In short, it is a conception of reality aptly summarized by Carnap, Han, and Neurath, senior members of the Vienna circle, as one in which “dark distances and unfathomable depths” are rejected since “In science there are no ‘depths’; there is surface everywhere” (1929/1973, 306). Depth of being, to which I shall also refer as ‘intension’, is dismissed from this picture as an illicit concept lacking proper application.²¹

Reaffirming ‘Intension’ as an Ontological Category

In order to shed further light upon the concept of depth of being, and upon its historical ebbs and flows, it behooves us to pay attention to the concept of *intension*, since the history of this concept reflects an interesting transformation

19 Other prominent ideas that went out of favor around the same time include such notions as *final causality*, *substantive form*, and the idea that nature is suffused with real *qualities*.

20 The point is made even more apparent in the context of *quantum physics*, where reference to acts of observation and measurement enters into the fundamental vocabulary of describing the ways of the world.

21 While I quote some analytic philosophers, Ken Wilber (2000, 169-170) nicely illustrates how the commitment to a depthless world was enthusiastically endorsed by *continental* thinkers.

in cultural attitudes towards the notion that existence, or being, contains a dimension of depth.

We may begin by fixing our gaze on the antithetical pair of *intension* and *extension*. Today, these terms are mostly known through their canonized use in logic. ‘Extension’ marks the compass of a term, that is, the set of *entities* to which it applies, or of which it is truly predicated; while ‘intension’ stands for the meaning the term conveys, namely, the *attributes* it ascribes to the things subsumed under its scope. For example, the extension of the term ‘prime number’ is the set of all prime numbers, while the intension of the term consists in the ascription of “being a positive integer bigger than 1 that has no positive integer divisors other than 1 and itself”. Significantly, the two are inversely related: the greater the intension of a term, conferring more attributes upon its designated objects, the smaller is the range of such objects, i.e., their extension. The more opulent the predication, the lesser its spread (and vice versa) – which is why the set of primes is a proper subset of the set of natural numbers. It is for this reason that Sir William Hamilton advocated the use of the terms ‘breadth’ and ‘depth’ as aptly corresponding to ‘extension’ and ‘intension’, respectively (1861: 629).

It is a mistake, however, to conclude on the basis of this familiar picture that the antithetical pair of ‘intension’ and ‘extension’ is applicable only in the fields of logic and semantics. For, noticeably, both terms have been used, to profound effects, in the realm of metaphysics. Yet, while the metaphysical sense of the term ‘extension’ is widely recognized by philosophers, that of ‘intension’ is rather occult, and is scarcely known to anyone who is not an expert in medieval philosophy.

The story of ‘extension’ is familiar. It was the term that Descartes used to identify the essence of corporeal substance. In other words, Descartes argued that it is the nature of matter, or body, to *extend*, namely, to occupy 3-dimensional space, and that this attribute of matter is more basic than all other characteristic features (or “modes”) of bodies such as motion, figure, and the like. In short, matter, for Descartes is a *res extensa*. Descartes concept of extension is symptomatic of the rise of the mechanistic conception of nature in the 17th century, and its introduction parallels that of another influential idea prevalent at the time, namely, the notion that nature is characterized solely by the so-called *primary qualities* such as size, motion, figure, or mass. Both concepts reflect a transition in thought, where nature came to be identified in purely quantitative terms; while sensible qualities, along with thought, meaning, purpose, and value, were relegated to a separate realm of mind, if they were to retain any hold on reality at all.

Be that as it may, given that the same term, *extension*, is used in two different contexts – in logic as well as in metaphysics – we may rightly wonder whether these two uses are meaningfully connected. I believe that the answer is positive, and that the two are linked both historically and conceptually. From a historical point of view, it is worth noticing that the term ‘extension’ was introduced into logical discourse in the famous *Port Royal Logic*, written by

Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, and published in 1662. The text is heavily influenced by Descartes's metaphysics (see Alan and Buroker 2022), and Arnauld, in particular, was a famous correspondent of Descartes and was receptive to his ideas. There is, therefore, contextual evidence to suggest that the introduction of the term 'extension' into logic was under the influence of Descartes's employment of the term in the context of his metaphysics and his physical theory. This conclusion gains further support in view of the conceptual linkage between the metaphysical and the logical senses of 'extension'. For it can reasonably be concluded that the logical concept of 'extension', namely, that of a term ranging over a class of entities, is a metaphorical extension (pun intended) of the original and more concrete sense of the word 'extend': which designates something that stretches out, unfolds, or expands. Needless to say, Descartes's geometrically articulated concept of 'extension' retains close proximity to the original sense of the word.

Our main concern, however, is with the counterpart concept of *intension*. For it is this concept which corresponds to our interest in the notion of ontological depth. I therefore turn next to consider the concept of intension as it was known in the context of scholastic metaphysics, since it is in this context that the concepts' metaphysical significance becomes apparent. The concept of 'intension' came into use during the High Middle Ages, with key figures such as Albert the Great and Aquinas, in conjunction with the opposite concept of 'remission' – the former designating a qualitative increase, the latter a decrease. There were two related uses of 'intension' and 'remission': the one more restricted and technical; the other more general and lofty.

The more restricted use pertains to the theory of the intension and remission of *forms* and *qualities* (see, for example, Clagett 1950; Shapiro 1959; Frost 2019). The central idea here was the notion that a given quality, or accidental form, can vary in *degree*, gaining or losing intensity, without necessarily turning into a different form or quality. For example, an object can lose or gain in brightness while remaining bright overall; likewise, a person's degree of charity (love of God) may vary over time. Thus, in this context, the distinction between 'intension' and 'remission' pertains to quantitative changes in qualitative determinations. During the Late Middle Ages, this emphasis on the quantifiability of qualities was much developed, and it is now regarded as an important landmark on the road leading to the development of modern science (Grant 1977, chap. 4).²²

Yet, there was another important context (albeit related to the former) in which medieval and renaissance thinkers utilized the antithetic concepts of 'intension' and 'remission', and it is this latter context that is of direct relevance

22 Remnants of these discussions are reflected in the modern concepts of *intensive magnitude*, i.e., a (qualitative) magnitude which can increase or decrease in degree, and of *intensive continuum*, viz., a continuum whose constitutive units exemplify qualitative heterogeneity. Each of these concepts is contrasted, in turn, to its *extensive* opposite (see Carnap 1966, chap. 7; Diehl 2012).

to our concern with the question of ontological depth. As Edward Mahoney explains at great length (1982 and 1987), ‘intension’ and ‘remission’ were also employed in the context of a general *hierarchy* of being. In this hierarchy, thoroughly Christian and scholastic yet heavily influenced by Neoplatonism, God was seated at the summit while prime matter marked the ultimate bottom.²³ Conceived as being itself, as well as the measure of all things, God was thereby considered to be the ultimate ground of the existence of all lesser beings. The latter, in turn, were said to partake in being to various *degrees* in correspondence with the respective measures in which they participated in God’s perfection. The closer a thing is to God, in virtue of partaking in his perfection to a higher degree, the more it possesses of being and actuality. Conversely, the less a thing partakes in God’s perfection, the less hold it has on reality and the more it approaches prime matter and non-being (prime matter, recall, was Aristotle’s term for an indeterminate pure potentiality, which therefore lacked actuality and determinate character).

Noticeably, in this scheme of things, intension (*intensio*) signifies being closer to God in the hierarchy of being, enjoying greater depths, or heights, of existence; while remission (*remissio*) signifies the opposite condition of being further removed from God and suffering a consequent lessening in being. This association of intension with perfection and a heightened level of existence is expressed poetically by none less than Milton, in his *Paradise Lost*, when he describes how Adam, alone in Paradise among birds and beasts, beseeches God to provide him with a female companion. The lines, I believe, are worth quoting:

“Let not my words offend thee, Heavenly Power;
My Maker, be propitious while I speak.
Hast thou not made me here thy substitute
And these inferiors far beneath me set?
Among unequals what society
Can sort, what harmony or true delight?
Which must be mutual, in proportion due
Given and received, but, in disparity,
The one *intense*, the other still *remiss*
Cannot well suit with either.”

(*Paradise Lost*, 1981, Book XIII, 380-389; italics mine).

Earlier, we observed the historical and conceptual connections between the employment of the term ‘extension’ in the sphere of metaphysics and its consequent use in logic and semantics. The case of ‘intension’ is no different. It is well known that it was Leibniz who introduced the term ‘intension’ into logical discourse, as a counterpart to ‘extension’ (and as a substitute for ‘comprehension’,

23 The most famous scholarly treatise on this subject is Arthur Lovejoy’s *The Great Chain of Being* (1933). Yet, oddly enough, Lovejoy makes no mention of ‘intension’ and ‘remission’.

the Port Royalists' term of choice). What is less known is that, in doing so, he was building upon the scholastic notion of *intensio*, in precisely the sense we have examined. In comparing the terms 'animal' and 'man' Leibniz states that the first has more instances and therefore greater extension, while the second has more degrees of reality and hence a greater intension.²⁴ Strictly speaking, it is, of course, not concepts which enjoy degrees of reality but, rather, the objects or subjects they designate. Nevertheless, the conceptual resemblance to the ontological use of 'intension' discussed above is undeniable. Moreover, as Mary Spencer (1971) stresses, in a rare paper exploring this esoteric subject, Leibniz was well-acquainted with the relevant scholastic literature.

It transpires, then, that the contrastive logical terms of 'extension' and 'intension' are both rooted in prior historical uses in the context of metaphysical discourse. It is interesting to observe, however, that while contemporary metaphysics still considers the concept of *extension* useful and relevant, it has all but completely eschewed the complementary concept of *intension*. No doubt, this is partly due to the fact that contemporary philosophers treat the notion of degrees of being with grave suspicion.²⁵ Things either exist or they don't exist, and it makes little sense to argue that one thing exists more than another. While this conclusion appears obvious when viewed at face value, it is not so obvious that the concept of degrees of being fails to make sense when considered in the context of a perennialist, consciousness-based ontology. If consciousness is the cement of reality, and if depth is a constitutive dimension of consciousness, then perhaps it is not so unintelligible to argue that gradations of depth of consciousness correspond to gradations of being.

Be that as it may, let us not debate the question of degrees of being any further but focus, instead, on what matters the most to the present discussion, namely, the idea that there is a *depth* dimension to being. As mentioned in section 4 above, this idea, too, is largely rejected by modern philosophy. Indeed, the decisive dismissal of depth constitutes yet another reason for the disappearance of the concept of *intension* from modern and contemporary metaphysics (arguably, a more significant reason than the one mentioned in the last paragraph) since the two – depth of being and intension – are intimately intertwined. Yet, as I have argued, given the perennial perspective on consciousness and spirituality the notion of depth of being makes perfectly good sense.

It is useful, in this respect, to pay heed to the similarities between (i) the perennialist conception of spiritual progress described in section 2 above, and (ii) the scholastic understanding of *intension* as participation in divine perfection, discussed in the present section. Spiritual progress, when pursued far enough, necessitates self-transcendence, which, in turn, involves coming into meaningful contact with the heightened reality of a transpersonal consciousness. To do so is nothing other than to partake in the perfections of such a being, accessing greater depths of experience in the process. In other words,

24 G. W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding* (Bk. IV, chap. 17, part 8).

25 For a notable exception see McDaniel (2017).

the spiritual journey is an *intensive* one: at various points, one may progress, regress, or remain stagnant, but the relevant gradients are clearly depth-gradients, clearly intensive.

We may therefore bring our metaphysical excursion to a close by concluding that the distinction between *breadth* and *depth*, *extension* and *intension*, should not be considered of pertinence merely in the context of logic and semantics. Instead, we shall do well to seriously consider its relevance and importance in the context of a general conception of reality, a general metaphysics. It is, in any event, a distinction of great significance in the context of thinking about spirituality – at least insofar as we do so from a perspective similar enough to the one espoused here.

Conclusion

In this paper, I attempted two goals. First, to present the outlines of a general account of spirituality, described here as the *perennial view*, which, in turn, presupposes the existence, and the ontological primacy, of cosmic consciousness. Second, to argue, on the basis of such a view, that there is a case to be made for a potential rehabilitation of the kindred notions of *depth of being* and *intension* as important ontological concepts. The latter project is, I believe, substantial for two major reasons. In the first place, because the concept of the depth of being is an integral aspect of the perennial view of spirituality. Secondly, because I share the conviction of various critics that the flattening of reality, i.e., the collapse of the idea that existence possesses a dimension of depth, and therefore also of height, plays an important role in some of the most conspicuous crises of modernity and post-modernity up to the present time. This is nowhere more conspicuous than in the so-called *crisis of meaning* so potently felt at the present. It is, however, beyond the pale of the present paper to comment further on this fascinating topic. I shall therefore leave the last words to one of the thinkers who best appreciated the problem, Huston Smith: “If deep is answering to deep less today it is not because the depths have changed, certainly not on their objective side. If our world has changed, this only reflects the change of the idea we now have of it” (1992: 80).

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Itaj Šani

Svest, duhovnost i ontološka dubina

Apstrakt:

Ovaj rad ima za cilj da ostvari dva komplementarna zadatka. Prvi cilj je da izloži i motiviše opšti prikaz duhovnosti u skladu sa takozvanom „perenijalnom filozofijom“. Iz ove perspektive, suština duhovnosti leži u uspostavljanju orijentacije ka kosmičkoj svesti i u inspirativnoj povezanosti s njom, pri čemu kosmička svest služi i kao temelj svih infrakosmičkih subjekata i kao konačni izvor značenja i vrednosti. Drugi cilj je da pokaže da jedna od prednosti ovakvog pogleda na prirodu duhovnosti jeste to što on otvara mogućnost za potencijalnu rehabilitaciju jedne važne, ali zanemarene ideje, naime ideje da konkretna stvarnost dopušta različite stepene intenzije, odnosno ontološke dubine.

Ključne reči: kosmička svest, dubina, intenzija, perenijalna filozofija, samotranscendencija, duhovnost.