Przegląd Religioznawczy 2(296)/2025
The Religious Studies Review

ISSN: 1230-4379
e-ISSN: 2658-1531
www.journal.ptr.edu.pl

EMIL CHAMMAS
Jagiellonian University in Krakow
Faculty of Philosophy
Institute of Psychology

DARIUSZ GRABOWSKI
Jagiellonian University in Krakow
Faculty of Philosophy
Institute of Psychology
e-mail: dariusz.grabowski@uj.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0003-1384-1389

DOI: 10.34813/ptr2.2025.8

Beyond the divine: A historical study of modern atheistic approaches to spirituality

Abstract. This article explores the intersection of atheism and spirituality, focusing on how thinkers with a naturalistic worldview have engaged with mystical and spiritual experiences. Divided into two parts, the study first examines late 19th and early 20th-century authors who, despite aligning with naturalism and maintaining a skeptical stance toward spiritualism, continued to explore mystical experiences. The second part delves into contemporary authors who not only embrace mystical experiences but also integrate them into scientific inquiry, highlighting the compatibility of such experiences with naturalism. Through the works of philosophers, scientists, and physicians, the article shows that spiritual and mystical experiences can coexist with a strictly naturalistic worldview, enriching our understanding of human consciousness without resorting to supernatural explanations. By revisiting key figures such as Bertrand Russell, Sigmund Freud, André Comte-Sponville, and others, this article contributes to ongoing debates in philosophy and science regarding the phenomenology of spiritual experiences and their epistemic value in understanding consciousness.

Keywords: atheistic spirituality, mystical experience, naturalism, consciousness, psychedelic research.

The subject of this article is atheistic spirituality, specifically how authors identified with the naturalistic worldview have related or relate to spiritual or mystical experiences. Thus, the article is a review of the works of selected authors (philosophers, scientists, and physicians) who assert that nothing requires any justification beyond the laws and forces of nature, yet who simultaneously exhibit a keen interest in what is typically described as spiritual or mystical experiences, acknowledging the actual occurrence and relevance of these experiences to scientific research.

The study is divided into two parts arranged chronologically. The first part is devoted to older authors from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, while the second part focuses on more recent authors from the latter half of the 20th century and contemporary times. There is a significant difference between the authors in the first and second parts. Although all were naturalists and showed an interest in spirituality in their work, it was only in modern times (in our case, dated from the latter half of the 20th century to the present day) that scientific interest in mystical and spiritual experiences was allowed to fully flourish, and indeed, such interest has been demanded of naturalist authors.

The counterculture of the 1950s and 60s, the New Age movement, a growing fascination with Buddhism and other Eastern religions, the rise in popularity of psychedelic substances, and postmodernism in both philosophy and art—all contributed to a renaissance of spirituality in the Western world. At the same time, these developments posed significant challenges to thinkers who identified with a strictly naturalistic worldview. Since the mid-20th century, research on the effects of psychoactive substances has provided undeniable evidence – obtained under strictly controlled conditions – of mental states typically described as psychedelic. These states closely resemble the experiences of unity with nature, God, or the entire universe that mystics have described for millennia. For example, Betty Eisner, a pioneer in psychotherapy using LSD, reflected on her first psychedelic experience: "I could feel myself being drawn into a mystical experience – the sense of unity with all things in the universe" (Hartogsohn, 2020, p. 70).

Although all the authors discussed in this study were interested in spiritual experiences, those in the first part primarily focused on critiquing traditional spiritualism and opposing supernatural explanations. Consequently, their approach to what may be termed spiritual experiences was predominantly skeptical. In contrast, the authors examined in the second part demonstrate a strong affirmation of such experiences. Nevertheless, each author was selected based on the criterion that none endorsed the path of theism or spiritualism.

It is now necessary to clarify the reasoning behind selecting the latter half of the 19th century as the lower chronological boundary of our study. This choice

is rooted in the evolution of the two central themes: spiritual experiences and the naturalistic worldview. We assert that the contemporary, relevant interpretations of these concepts have only truly emerged within the last 150 years.

When discussing spiritual or mystical experiences, it is crucial to define what these terms encompass. In this study, we use the terms "spiritual experience", "mystical experience", and "mysticism" interchangeably. This reflects both the terminology used by the authors we analyze and our belief that the definition of spiritual experience we have adopted is broad enough to encompass all of these terms.

It is important to recognize that the concept of mysticism, as understood today, only acquired its current meaning relatively recently. As Bernard McGinn, one of the leading scholars of mysticism, observed: "No mystics (at least before the present century) believed in or practiced 'mysticism'. They believed in or practiced Christianity (or Judaism, or Islam, or Hinduism)" (McGinn, 1991, p. XVI). It was only in the 20th century that authors and thinkers began to conceptualize "mysticism" as a broad phenomenon common to all religions, potentially even accessible without adherence to religious dogmas, and, according to some, available to all individuals.

How, then, do we define a spiritual, mystical, or psychedelic experience? For this study, we have adopted the definition proposed by Alister Hardy, arguably the most influential researcher of spiritual experiences in the latter half of the 20th century and the founder of the Center for the Study of Religious Experience. Hardy defined a spiritual experience as "a sense of being influenced by or in the presence of a higher power, whether called God or not, different from the everyday self, and difficult to express in natural language" (Hardy, 1979, p. 20). While Hardy himself is not among the authors discussed in this study due to his metaphysical beliefs, his definition remains relevant, as it does not necessarily imply any supernatural elements. This broad definition of a "power greater than oneself" does not confine such experiences to a divine or supernatural framework. Our study seeks to demonstrate that these experiences can fully align with a naturalistic worldview, as evidenced by the authors we examine.

The modern naturalistic worldview made its debut during the Age of Enlightenment, with perhaps the first clear articulation coming from a humble French provincial priest, Jean Meslier. Although one can likely trace an interest in spiritual experiences in the works of prominent Enlightenment naturalists like Julien Offray de La Mettrie and Denis Diderot, this will not be the focus of our study. Despite the boldness and novelty of their atheistic philosophy, we believe that the conceptual gap between their time and ours is too significant for direct comparison.

We must then clarify what we mean by naturalism or the naturalistic worldview. Although the concept itself is relatively straightforward, it warrants some specification. In this study, we refer to naturalism primarily in its ontological sense – the belief that only physical entities governed by natural laws and forces exist, with no external factors or agents beyond these. Understood in this way, naturalism is somewhat broader than materialism. For instance, Bertrand Russell, whom we discuss in the first part of this paper, was a committed naturalist but not strictly a materialist, as he did not equate all existence with matter. Moreover, naturalism differs from reductionist physicalism, as it does not demand that everything be explained solely through the language of physics. The languages of biology, chemistry, and even cognitive science may also offer accurate and meaningful descriptions of the world.

Western culture has traditionally positioned spiritual experiences in opposition to a naturalistic worldview, likely due to the fact that most direct accounts of such experiences have been provided by deeply religious individuals (see especially James's review in "The Varieties of Religious Experience"). The primary aim of this study is to challenge this stark dichotomy by presenting authors for whom spiritual experience and naturalism can coexist.

This study employs a literature review methodology, systematically analyzing and comparing the works of selected authors from the late 19th century to the present. The examined texts include contributions from philosophers, scientists, and psychologists who, while committed to a naturalistic worldview, have shown an interest in spiritual or mystical experiences. The selection criteria required that each author acknowledged the occurrence and relevance of these experiences while refraining from theistic or supernatural explanations. The study is structured chronologically, with the first part focusing on early naturalists and the second on contemporary perspectives, reflecting the growing integration of spiritual experiences within scientific discourse.

Our primary sources consist of the works cited throughout the article, which include key texts from authors such as Bertrand Russell, Sigmund Freud, Ernst Haeckel, Abraham Maslow, and Sam Harris, among others. These sources provide the foundation for a comparative analysis of different approaches to spiritual experience within an atheistic or naturalistic framework.

In line with an increasing number of contemporary scholars (e.g., Dennett, 2006; Hardy, 1979; Horgan, 2003; Metzinger, 2009; Yaden & Newberg, 2022), we argue that reclaiming spiritual experience for science holds significant epistemic value. There is reason to assume that studying spiritual experiences can contribute not only to understanding pathological states of the mind but also, by offering insights into the nature of experience in all its forms, to a broader understanding of consciousness itself. Therefore, we hope that this

short review will make a modest contribution to the ongoing discussion on the phenomenology of cognition and the so-called „hard problem" of consciousness.

Bertrand Russell

Bertrand Russell, renowned for his critical stance toward religion, was a declared atheist and a naturalist. While his characteristic philosophy of neutral monism makes it difficult to label him strictly as a materialist, his commitment to a scientific worldview and opposition to superstition firmly positioned him as a naturalist. Despite his critiques, Russell's reflections on mysticism demonstrate a nuanced approach, particularly in his essay *Mysticism and logic* (1914).[1]

In this essay, Russell examined the interplay between mystical intuition and rational inquiry. He argued that while mysticism might serve as an initial impetus for understanding the world, it ultimately obscures truth when it dismisses sensory evidence and temporal reality. Drawing on the philosophies of Heraclitus and Plato, Russell explored the tension between mystical and scientific perspectives, highlighting the value of mysticism as a source of inspiration rather than a reliable epistemological framework. He formulated four key questions to critique mystical thought:

1. "Are there ways of knowing, which may be called respectively reason and intuition?"
2. "Is all plurality and division illusory?"
3. "Is time unreal?"
4. "What kind of reality belongs to good and evil?" (Russell, 1917, p. 11).

While Russell concluded that mysticism is ultimately mistaken, he acknowledged an "element of wisdom" in its emotional influence on human thought. He stated: „Even the cautious and patient investigation of truth by science, which seems the very antithesis of the mystic's swift certainty, may be fostered and nourished by that very spirit of reverence in which mysticism lives and moves" (Russell, 1917, pp. 11–12).

This acknowledgment reflects Russell's broader attitude toward the natural world. In A Free Man's Worship (1903), he depicted a universe devoid of inherent purpose, shaped by random atomic collisions, yet celebrated human resilience in creating values and meaning. He described the indifference of the universe in striking terms:

[1] Further citations refer to the 1917 edition of the essay, published in the book collection titled *Mysticism and logic and other essays*. The further cited essay *A free man's worship* was also published in the same collection.

> That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins – all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. (Russell, 1917, pp. 47–48)

Yet, in the face of this indifferent cosmos, Russell argued for a uniquely human freedom: the ability to create values and imbue existence with purpose. He wrote: "In this lies Man's true freedom: in determination to worship only the God created by our own love of the good, to respect only the heaven which inspires the insight of our best moments" (Russell, 1917, p. 50).

Russell's appreciation for the natural world—as revealed by science—underpinned his critique of mysticism's rejection of temporal reality. Borrowing the term "the book of Nature" from Galileo, he argued that understanding the world requires acceptance of its temporal and sensory dimensions rather than their denial.

Russell also emphasized the contrast between mystical attitudes and the rigorous discipline of science. While mysticism often seeks instant certainties through intuition, science relies on patient investigation and empirical validation. However, Russell did not see these approaches as entirely irreconcilable. Instead, he believed that the emotional inspiration derived from mysticism could fuel a scientific curiosity that, in turn, leads to genuine understanding. This perspective highlights Russell's capacity to balance critique with appreciation, recognizing that the reverence and wonder often associated with mysticism have a vital role in shaping human inquiry.

There is no doubt, however, that while Russell had a "spiritual" attitude towards the world, he did not believe the world was spiritual in the traditional sense. What characterized his views consistently was a staunch naturalism: human beings and their minds were, according to him, merely transient and entirely natural effects of the physical transformations of the Universe, directed by no one and having no inherent purpose.

In this context, it is intriguing to contrast Russell with another prominent monist whose philosophy placed spirituality at the forefront: the German naturalist, philosopher, and physician Ernst Haeckel. Haeckel's ideas gained considerable influence in both natural science and philosophy toward the end

of the 19th century and the early 20th century. To trace the development of Haeckel's philosophy, it is useful to revisit 1872, when another distinguished German scholar, Emil du Bois-Reymond, delivered his famous lecture on the limits of our knowledge of nature at the Congress of German Naturalists and Physicians in Leipzig.

Ernst Haeckel and Emil du Bois-Reymond

In his lecture, du Bois-Reymond likened science to an ancient conqueror who, amidst his triumphant march, pauses to survey the conquered territories and delineate their natural boundaries. He argued that the ultimate triumphs of science – and, consequently, our understanding of nature – reduce all physical changes to mathematically calculable movements of molecules. If we could compute every such movement, our need for understanding causality in the world would be fully satisfied. This notion inevitably evokes the image of Laplace's demon, and indeed, du Bois-Reymond referenced this concept to illustrate the absolute horizon of scientific possibilities.

He then noted, however, that within the horizon of scientific possibilities, we are bound to encounter contradictions and paradoxes – even Laplace's demon would be entangled in them. The reason for this is simple: our epistemic expectations differ from the language of science. If everything were reduced to quantity, we would not truly gain knowledge of how one thing influences another, as everything would be the same thing. In other words, we would lack the qualities that satisfy our senses and address our fundamental questions about the origins of things and the causal chains they form – we would lack qualities, which are, so to speak, the only nourishment for our senses.

In this way, du Bois-Reymond arrived at the conclusion that we neither know nor will ever know the ultimate nature of matter and energy. Additionally, he recognized another insurmountable limitation in our understanding of nature: the nature of consciousness. As he stated:

> Still, as regards mental operations themselves, it is clear that, even with astronomical knowledge of the mind-organ, they would be as unintelligible as they are now. Were we possessed of such knowledge, they would still remain perfectly unintelligible. Astronomical knowledge of the brain – the highest grade of knowledge we can expect ever to have – discloses to us nothing but matter in motion. But we cannot, by means of any imaginable movement of material particles, bridge over the chasm between the conscious and the unconscious. (du Bois-Reymond, 1874, pp. 27–28)

Du Bois-Reymond did not intend to suggest the existence of free will or an immaterial soul. To illustrate his complete rejection of dualism, he offered the following example: if we could recreate all the atoms of Julius Caesar, positioning and moving them exactly as they were when he stood on the banks of the Rubicon, we would undoubtedly recreate the exact same Julius Caesar. Initially, this recreated Caesar would share with the original all his sensations, ambitions, imaginations, memories, as well as both inherited and acquired abilities. However, du Bois-Reymond concluded, "Whether we shall ever understand mental phenomena from their material conditions is a very different question from that other, whether these phenomena are the product of material conditions" (1874, p. 31).

Thus, there are limitations that science will never be able to overcome; in certain matters, we are not only ignorant now, but we will always remain so. „Ignorabimus!" – du Bois-Reymond declared, concluding his lecture in this manner.[2] Although du Bois-Reymond delineated two boundaries to our understanding of the world, he ultimately discerned that these are essentially two sides of the same limitation. This limitation arises from the very nature of things, or, in other words, from the nature of ourselves and the fundamental structure of our cognition.

One could argue that, for du Bois-Reymond, the mystery was simply experience itself, rather than specifically spiritual experience. Nevertheless, the strategy he employed also sheds light on the latter, as it prompts us to consider which component of what makes spiritual experience so difficult to explain can be attributed to the fact that it ultimately seems irreducible to the movements of atoms in the brain.

In 1880, during an address delivered to the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences in Berlin, du Bois-Reymond reiterated some of the points he had made eight years earlier in Leipzig. However, he also introduced the „seven enigmas of the world" that science faces. For two of these enigmas, the same „ignorabimus" applied. The great advocate of mechanistic science thus once again emphasized that mechanistic science would never solve the mystery of consciousness nor fully understand the ultimate nature of matter and ener-

[2] One might easily assume that du Bois-Reymond was a proponent of Kantian philosophy. However, he himself disagreed with this notion. As his biographer notes: "Most of his philosophical critics had assumed du Bois-Reymond to be a Kantian, a mistake in judgment that was a consequence of academic specialization. 'Since Kant transformed the discipline,' du Bois-Reymond explained, 'philosophy has taken on so esoteric a character, has so forgotten the language of common sense and plain thought, has so evaded the questions that most deeply stir our youth, or treated them condescendingly as officious speculations, and finally, has so opposed the rise of science, that it is not surprising that even the recollection of its earlier achievements has been lost." (Finkelstein, 2013, p. 272).

gy. As before, his address provoked a stormy reaction within the scientific community.

Sixteen years his junior, Ernst Haeckel had already accused du Bois-Reymond of undermining the potential of science, undercutting the achievements of evolutionism, and serving the interests of Christianity (since the death of his beloved wife, Haeckel had been a fierce opponent of institutional religion). Haeckel (1895) also asserted that if one truly considers the material world and the psyche as two sides of the same enigma (*Welträtsel*) and applies the methods of mechanistic science to it, its solution will inevitably be within our reach.

In 1899, three years after du Bois-Reymond's death, Haeckel's reflections on this subject culminated in the monumental work titled *Die Welträtsel. Gemeinverständliche Studien über monistische Philosophie* (The Riddle of the Universe. Popular Studies in Monistic Philosophy). By that time, Haeckel was already well known for his monistic views. However, he ultimately concluded that the typical monism of materialists did not satisfy him, as it overlooked the enigma of consciousness, which, in his view, should not only not be neglected but made the key to understanding the nature of all reality.

Haeckel thus considered psychical phenomena to be another name for energy, which, alongside matter, would be a fundamental attribute of the single universal substance that constitutes the entire universe. Consequently, its presence could be detected even in atoms, although at this most basic level, it would only manifest in rudimentary phenomena such as attraction or repulsion. However, by tracing its development through a phylogenetically oriented physics, it would eventually be possible to explain even human consciousness, which is merely a higher evolutionary form of this energy. In this way, Haeckel (1934) maintained, the greatest riddle of the universe would find its ultimate solution.

However, Haeckel saw in Darwinism (and in science more broadly) much more than du Bois-Reymond or Bertrand Russell did. He viewed it as the ultimate answer to everything – biologistic and anti-Christian, yet in a sense quasi-religious. Haeckel declared that he sought to explain the world not through telos (as had been done before Darwin) but purely through natural selection. Unlike du Bois-Reymond and Russell, he did not accept that the coin bearing the mechanical laws of science on its obverse has total contingency on its reverse. Thus, he believed that the universe is, indeed, a riddle that can be solved intelligibly. The "unconscious regulator" – as he called natural selection (Haeckel, 1934, p. 215) – despite being unconscious, was, in his view, more psychical than purely mechanical because it operated with a specific purpose in mind.

In Haeckel's worldview, everything was interconnected and self-explanatory through a pantheistic monism, inspired by a cosmic sense of aesthetics. Although he denied ordinary teleology and opposed conventional religiosity, Haeckel was convinced that the development of the Universe was driven by the realization of an inherent beauty. This, even if it did not necessarily imply teleology, certainly suggested a kind of finalism. Meanwhile, Russell seemed to understand that if the world was not designed by divine intent – which Haeckel also firmly rejected – then in reality, nothing guarantees that the world will continue to evolve in the same direction as before, nor is there any reason to believe that what has already happened is evidence of the good intentions of the universe (Russell, 1997, p. 216).

In one of the final chapters of his 1935 book *Religion and science*, Russell outlined three forms of the doctrine of "Cosmic Purpose": theistic, pantheistic, and what he called "emergent" (in the latter, "At an earlier stage, nothing in the universe foresees a later stage, but a kind of blind impulsion leads to those changes which bring more developed forms into existence, so that, in some obscure sense, the end is implicit in the beginning" (Russell, 1997, p. 191). Although Russell does not mention Haeckel by name, it can be assumed that, broadly speaking and with some simplifications, Haeckel's views would fall somewhere between the second and third forms of the doctrine of cosmic purpose: the world is a unity, yet through natural selection, it develops as a whole in a certain direction – towards ever greater beauty and perfection.

Russell rejected the arguments of all three groups of proponents of cosmic purpose. In his view, the state of affairs is such that nothing in the physical world possesses even the slightest inherent meaning or purpose; only humans have the capacity to impart these qualities to it. Thus, in reality, an ant is no more perfect or beautiful than an amoeba, a nightingale no more perfect than an ant, and a human no more perfect than a nightingale. Similarly, what awaits the universe will not be more perfect or better than what exists now, only different. The world itself is neither beautiful nor ugly, neither good nor bad. It is within human power to give meaning to the world and shape it in a way that makes it as good as possible for us.

Sigmund Freud

Among naturalists, Haeckel is best known for his theory of recapitulation, which he did not invent but significantly shaped by introducing the concepts of phylogeny and ontogeny. Sigmund Freud, one of its ardent supporters, drew heavily on these ideas. Freud's views are challenging to summarize briefly,

yet his influence on modern concepts of human mentality and spirituality demands attention. Freud represented a scientific stance toward the world, though his understanding of science was unique. Often considered a materialist (Smith, 1999), Freud granted matter a considerable degree of freedom, making his approach distinctive.

Freud's stance toward religion and transcendence was no less critical than Bertrand Russell's. He saw religion as a "collective neurosis," a critique evident in works such as *Totem and taboo, The future of an illusion, Moses and monotheism,* and *Civilization and its discontents.* The latter introduced the concept of the "oceanic feeling," described as a sensation of something boundless and all-encompassing. This idea was suggested to Freud by Romain Rolland, who criticized Freud's neglect of subjective origins in religious phenomena, focusing instead on its social aspects (*The future of an illusion*). Freud acknowledged that he had never personally experienced the oceanic feeling, yet he chose to analyze it through intellectual means (Freud, 1962, p. 12).

For Freud, the oceanic feeling provided another pathway – alongside dreams and neuroses –to uncover the unconscious. He linked it to ontogenetically and phylogenetically earlier stages of development, referring to it as a psychological regression to the state of primary narcissism. In this stage, the boundaries between self and world remain undifferentiated, a state not governed by the reality principle: "Our present ego-feeling is... a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive – indeed, an all-embracing – feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it" (Freud, 1962, p. 15).

Freud's evolutionary speculations in *Beyond the pleasure principle* tied this sensation to the "nirvana principle," a term borrowed from Barbara Low and linked to the death drive (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973). Freud postulated that organisms strive toward a tensionless state, which paradoxically aligns with the cessation of life. The death drive, though anti-life, is balanced by life itself (Freud, 1959). This duality underpins Freud's exploration of psychic phenomena.

Freud saw psychic energy as governed by two principles: homeostasis, maintaining excitation at a constant level, and tension reduction, experienced as pleasurable. However, the latter suggested an ultimate absurdity – a drive toward zero energy incompatible with life. This apparent paradox illuminates the oceanic feeling as both a regression to primal unity and a fulfillment of the death drive's aims under the nirvana principle.

Central to Freud's theory are conflicts within the psychic apparatus, where pleasure in one part causes tension in another. This dynamic explains the oceanic feeling's association with primal fusion, a state where individual desires

fade, needs are fulfilled, and tension approaches zero. Some psychoanalysts, like Otto Rank (1929), even argued that this state mirrors experiences in the womb, reinforcing its link to regression.

In *Civilization anhhiscontents*, Freud emphasized that the ego is not fixed but develops over time. Initially, the ego encompasses everything and later separates the self from the external world. This developmental trajectory explains why the oceanic feeling is not a mystical revelation of unity but a regression to an infantile state where distinctions between self and other are blurred. Freud observed that remnants of this primary ego-feeling persist in some individuals, manifesting as a longing for unity with the universe.

Freud's critique of mysticism extended to its roots in the unconscious. Rather than a spiritual revelation, he interpreted mystical experiences as manifestations of repressed desires and primal fantasies. This naturalistic approach to mysticism aligns with his broader psychoanalytic framework, seeking to uncover the unconscious mechanisms shaping human behavior.

Freud's work often blurred the lines between science and speculation, particularly in his evolutionary theories. While his ideas on the death drive and nirvana principle remain contentious, they offer profound insights into human psychology. By linking the oceanic feeling to early developmental and evolutionary stages, Freud provided a framework to understand spiritual experiences through naturalistic and psychoanalytic lenses. His intellectualist approach – valuing the author's hidden thoughts over emotional responses – underscored his belief in the power of reason to decode the mysteries of the human mind.

Ultimately, Freud's exploration of the oceanic feeling reflects his broader project: uncovering the unconscious roots of human behavior and spirituality. His insights continue to shape contemporary debates on the intersection of psychology, spirituality, and science, offering a profound, if sometimes controversial, perspective on the human condition.

André Comte-Sponville

To properly explain the philosophical program that Sponville calls "Atheistic Spirituality," it is necessary to briefly trace the intellectual environment from which he emerged. Born in 1952, Sponville was initially a devout Catholic but became aligned with the Left during the 1968 revolts, leaving the Young Christian Students movement to join the Union of Communist Students. While studying in Paris, he was taught by Louis Althusser and had the opportunity to work alongside Jacques Derrida. Through his immersion in postmodern

philosophy, Sponville became convinced that not only was God dead, but that He had never existed, and that ultimate truth – if it exists – lies beyond the bounds of language. However, it is notable that Sponville never became entirely indifferent to Christian ideas. Over time, he began to recognize the risks involved in wholly rejecting religion. It was from these experiences that he developed the concept of "atheistic spirituality."

Sponville defines religion, as a system of beliefs and practices related to the sacred, which unites individuals into a single community. He emphasizes that he is not religious in this sense, as he holds no beliefs, being a consistent atheist and materialist. Despite this, he asserts that religion – when traditional rather than fanatical – holds immense value for individuals and humanity. It enables the formation of communities, provides meaning and narrative, and – perhaps most importantly – often serves as a brake on the cruelty (including religious fanaticism) of which humans are capable (Comte-Sponville, 2008).

In light of this, the creator of "atheistic spirituality" perceives a significant threat in Western Europe's rejection of Christianity without adopting any other spiritual system in its place. He believes this creates societal nihilism that:

> [...] plays into the hands of barbarians. There are two types of barbarism, however, which is important not to conflate: the first, irreligious is merely a generalized or triumphant nihilism. The second, fanaticized, attempts to impose its faith on others through the useing force. Nihilism leads to the former and leaves the field open to the latters. (Comte-Sponville, 2008, p. 25)

However, Sponville does not consider traditional responses to this problem, such as religious reactionism, to be satisfactory – after all, he is an atheist. The solution he proposes is to focus on what he views as a purely human and natural mystical experience. To describe the nature of such an experience and how it can be characterized, he references the final sentence of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. Sponville argues that what is most important and profound in human existence cannot be fully expressed in words but can only be experienced in silence. For Sponville, spirituality is the experience of being in and of itself, without passing judgment and with a radical acceptance of all aspects of nature, which he regards as the absolute – a unity that encompasses all that exists. This experience leads to deeper love, well-being, and a heightened awareness of the world's wonder. As he writes: "Metaphysics means thinking about these things; spirituality means experiencing them, exercising them, living them. This is what distinguishes it from religion, which is merely one of its possible forms" (Comte-Sponville, 2008, p. 136).

Sponville observes that the mystical experience, as he defines it, has been described by many before him: Freud referred to it as the "oceanic feeling,"

while Swami Prajnanapada called it "the experience of feeling at one with everything" (Comte-Sponville, 2008, p. 150). By this, Sponville underscores that his understanding of spirituality is universal across all cultures and religions, and therefore, has the potential to restore mysticism to its essential role as the loving glue that binds society together. Although this universal experience is ultimately inexpressible in words, the French philosopher believes it encompasses several aspects that collectively form the phenomenological unity of mysticism. He identifies and elaborates on these aspects in *The book of atheist spirituality*:

- Plenitude: Following Lucretius and Siddhartha Gautama, Sponville describes this as the absence of desires – a moment when the craving for possession and constant change subsides, allowing the individual to be fully content with what they have in that very moment.
- Unity: This is achieved when a person transcends internal dualism, recognizing that they are both merely and fully a part of a larger system, which may be called nature, the absolute, or, as some might say, God.
- Eternity: This aspect pertains to the present moment, which neither will be nor has ever been, but always is. Full immersion in the present is, in a sense, equivalent to halting time.
- Serenity: This arises from the understanding that "there is nothing left to hope for and nothing to fear" (Comte-Sponville, 2008, p. 174), filling the individual with a profound sense of inner peace.

All of these elements together form what Sponville terms the mystical experience. As we have seen, in describing this experience, he draws freely from the wisdom of both Western and Eastern traditions. He argues that this experience provides the foundation for all spirituality. However, Sponville also acknowledges that such experiences are rare, raising the important question of how to practice the "atheistic spirituality" he advocates.

Sponville's response is to aim for at least one mystical experience, recognizing that for most people, it may occur only once or a few times in a lifetime. This experience should then serve as the basis for the values that one adheres to, as these values can be found in everyday life. Chiefly, these values include simplicity, peace, and a deeply compassionate attitude toward oneself and others. However, if a person has never had a mystical experience – which Sponville acknowledges is also normal – they can seek to listen in silence to their own conscience to discover these values, and look for a role model in a spiritual authority of their choosing. This authority could be a religious figure, but it might also be a secular scientist or anyone else. Sponville concludes his discussion of daily spirituality with one of the more well-known Zen koans: "I am cutting wood, I am drawing water, How marvelous" (Comte-Sponville, 2008, p. 196).

Psychedelic psychiatry

When discussing the value of mystical experiences within a naturalistic framework, it is essential to consider the psychedelic research conducted within 20th-century psychiatry. However, before delving into this topic, it is important to outline the context in which these studies emerged, particularly the psychotomimetic approach. This approach posited that the states induced by certain psychoactive substances were very similar, if not identical, to the psychotic states experienced by individuals suffering from schizophrenia. A foundational work for this paradigm can be traced back to the French psychiatrist Jacques-Joseph Moreau and his book *Hashish and mental illness*). Moreau claimed that through experiments with consciousness and drugs, he gained deeper insights into the disorders and pathological mental states of his patients. This approach garnered numerous followers, including Ernst Joëll, Fritz Fränkel, and Alexandre Rouhier. Proponents of the psychotomimetic paradigm in psychiatry and clinical psychology sought to understand the essence of psychosis by experimenting with the latest substances available in Europe. Moreau de Tours even asserted, "There is not a single elementary symptom of mental illness that cannot be found in the mental changes caused by hashish" (Moreau, 1973, p. 18).

Although this approach remained niche during the first half of the 20th century, it gained significant popularity after Albert Hofmann's discovered LSD. When Viennese psychiatrist Otto Kauders introduced LSD to the American audience, claiming that even a minimal amount of the substance could drive a person to insanity, psychiatrists at Harvard Medical School saw this as a breakthrough. They believed that finding an antidote to LSD's effects could lead to a cure for schizophrenia (Marks, 1991).

The value of experiences induced by psychoactive substances was recognized early in scientific and materialistic psychiatry. However, until the 1950s, these states were considered psychopathological, useful only in the search for treatments for psychoses. This perspective shifted when some psychiatrists and psychologists began experimenting with LSD themselves, claiming it allowed them a deeper understanding of their minds.

In the 1950s, schizophrenia researchers began to challenge the psychotomimetic paradigm for two primary reasons. First, they highlighted the phenomenological differences between schizophrenic hallucinations and those induced by LSD. Second, they argued that experimentally induced altered states of consciousness could not be equated with the spontaneous, organic onset of delirium or terrifying hallucinations. Acknowledging these limitations,

British-American psychiatrist Humphrey Osmond noted that the effects of substances like LSD and mescaline did not necessarily have to be negative. Despite the experimental flaws in psychotomimetic psychiatry, he believed these substances held significant potential for a wide range of applications. In correspondence with poet Aldous Huxley, Osmond coined the now-legendary phrase: "To sink in hell or soar angelic, you'll need a pinch of psychedelic" (Huxley, 1977, p. 107).

Osmond coined the term "psychedelic," meaning "manifesting the mind," to suggest that substances like LSD could reveal the depths of the psyche, uncover unconsciousness, or unlock the potential for positive and blissful states. He first introduced the term in „The Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences" (1957), urging readers to reconsider their attitudes toward psychedelic substances.

Osmond's approach was significant not only for its impact on psychedelic discourse but also for his efforts to integrate transpersonal and spiritual experiences induced by psychedelics into scientific and naturalistic psychiatry. He appreciated the mystical approach to entheogens and was a sympathizer of the Native American Church, whose members used mescaline as a sacrament. Likely influenced by his participation in one of the church's ceremonies, Osmond remarked: "My experiences with these substances have been the most strange, most awesome, and among the most beautiful things in a varied and fortunate life. These are not escapes but enlargements, burgeonings of reality" (Solomon, 1964, p. 142).

Thus, the creator of the term "psychedelic" emphasized that, despite the biases of biologists and scientists, psychedelic experiences enhance our understanding of reality rather than obscure it. Far from being pathological, they contribute positively to human well-being. Osmond maintained a steadfast commitment to his scientific perspective, arguing that mystical experiences induced by psychedelics hold value not only for science but for humanity as a whole. He believed these experiences could serve as methods of treatment, tools for maintaining well-being, and avenues for exploring "new lands" of the mind, thereby contributing to the broader history of human development. As he wrote:

> Our interest, so far, has been psychiatric and pathological, with only a hint that any other viewpoint is possible; yet our predecessors were interested in these things from quite different points of view. In the perspective of history, our psychiatric and pathological bias is the unusual one. (Solomon, 1964, p. 141)

Osmond's approach exemplifies a form of spirituality fully compatible with atheism. From this perspective, mystical experiences become a means of exploring nature itself rather than an external, supernatural reality. Moreover, from

a historical standpoint, these experiences are entirely natural for our species, inherently tied to our drive to expand consciousness and, in a sense, are fully physiological.

Abraham Maslow

Abraham Maslow is best known as the creator of the Hierarchy of Needs and a central figure in Humanistic Psychology. However, a lesser-known aspect of his work is his contribution to the development of Transpersonal Psychology and the Psychology of Spirituality. Despite his deep interest in these areas, Maslow was a self-declared atheist. He maintained that the experiences often described by religious individuals, or even by the founders of major religions during moments of mystical ecstasy, are entirely human experiences, which can also occur in a humanistic and "godless" context. Maslow referred to such experiences as "peak experiences".

After establishing and popularizing his famous hierarchy of needs, Maslow conducted qualitative research on individuals he considered to be self-actualizing. He observed that these individuals experienced profound encounters that transcended ordinary notions of happiness or meaning. It was not about the specific activities these individuals engaged in, but rather about the way they sometimes experienced the world – whether connected to activities like meditation, taking psychedelic substances, love, or being in nature, or arising spontaneously.

According to Maslow, this way of experiencing the world was so distinct from ordinary perception that he coined the term "B-cognition" to describe it. This second-order consciousness arises during peak experiences and is accompanied by what he called "B-values." Maslow elaborated on these values as follows:

> These B-values are, so far as I can make out at this point, (a) wholeness, integration, unity, and interconnectedness; (b) necessity, perfection; (c) aliveness, good functioning, spontaneity, and process; (d) richness, intricacy, and complexity; (e) beauty, awe-fulness; (f) goodness, rightness, desirability; (g) uniqueness, idiosyncrasy, and expressiveness; (h) effortlessness, ease of achievement, lack of strain or striving; and finally (i) occasionally, but not always, an element of humor or playfulness. (Maslow, 1959, pp. 51–52)

He also noted: "My findings indicate that in the normal perceptions of self-actualizing people and in the more occasional peak experiences of average people, perception can be relatively ego-transcending, self-forgetful, egoless" (Maslow, 1959, p. 48).

Maslow described peak experiences as states of consciousness characterized by a heightened intensity of specific values perceived as positive or blissful, often involving an altered perception of reality. Importantly, he observed that these experiences were valued intrinsically; they were not sought for any instrumental purpose. While most activities and experiences serve a higher goal, peak experiences, according to Maslow, are the "ultimate goals of living and the ultimate validations and justifications for it"(Maslow, 1959, p. 50).

In alignment with his atheistic worldview, Maslow believed that mysticism and spirituality are fundamentally rooted in peak experiences. As such, they hold value for scientific inquiry, as studying peak experiences allows us to indirectly understand what mystics or even the founders of great religions like Jesus or Buddha might have experienced. For Maslow, mystical experiences are a natural part of being human, and without them, our understanding of human nature and existence remains incomplete. Historically, humanity has used mystical language to describe these experiences, which led to their association with religions. As he wrote:

> In a word, we can study today what happened in the past and was then explainable in supernatural terms only. By so doing, we are enabled to examine religion in all its facets and in all its meanings in a way that makes it a part of science rather than something outside and exclusive of it. (Maslow, 1964, p. 20)

However, he argued that spirituality should not be ceded to religious extremists or fanatics. Maslow warned that when scientists, secular individuals, and humanists neglect spirituality and leave this realm of discourse to conservative believers or religious-national organizations, it creates a dangerous vacuum. In such a scenario, non-believers or liberal believers are left without "spiritual nourishment," while more radical groups could exploit something as profound as peak experiences for divisive purposes. In the final years of his life, Maslow's mission was clear: "I want to demonstrate that spiritual values have naturalistic meaning, that they are not the exclusive possession of organized churches, […], they are the general responsibility of all mankind" (1964, p. 4). Thus, Maslow's vision of spirituality sought to make it accessible to atheists and others who were not involved in organized religion, demonstrating that it is a purely humanistic pursuit.

Conclusion: Sam Harris and the importance of spirituality for modern atheists

Instead of a typical conclusion, we will examine one of the most well-known contemporary authors promoting atheistic spirituality. Samuel L. Harris, best known for works such as *The end of faith* and *Waking up: A guide to spirituality without religion*, persuasively argues that atheistic spirituality is not merely an intellectual curiosity but a crucial element of secular life. Given that Harris's views on religion are well-known and widely recognized, we will focus on his arguments concerning the importance of spirituality within a fully rational, scientifically guided, and atheistic world.

In *Waking up*, Harris asserts that there is no inherent contradiction between what he calls "spirituality" and rationality. He offers two key reasons for this claim: firstly, while the content of religious beliefs is undoubtedly false, Harris suggests that what is of interest is not the dogma itself but rather the subjective experiences that religious founders, mystics, and many contemporary individuals have had. His emphasis lies on the nature of personal mental experiences – something that does not conflict with science, as it does not invoke metaphysical or anti-scientific claims. As Harris notes:

> Nothing in this book needs to be accepted on faith. Although my focus is on human subjectivity – I am, after all, talking about the nature of experience itself – all my assertions can be tested in the laboratory of your own life. In fact, my goal is to encourage you to do just that. (Harris, 2014, p. 7)

Secondly, many insights from mystics and spiritual traditions are increasingly supported by modern scientific research. Harris points to the example of how subjective awareness – how we perceive and pay attention to the present moment – directly influences our well-being:

> How we pay attention to the present moment largely determines the character of our experience and, therefore, the quality of our lives. Mystics and contemplatives have made this claim for ages – but a growing body of scientific research now bears it out. (Harris, 2014, p. 3)

What, then, is the core of spirituality, and why is it necessary for contemporary atheists? Harris answers the first question by stating that the essence of spirituality, and perhaps what it can ultimately be reduced to, is the recognition of the illusory nature of the self. According to Harris (2014), much like the teachings of Buddhist, Hindu, and Sufi mystics, what we perceive as

the self is merely a collection of phenomena and nothing more – nothing that exists independently.

As for the second question – why do atheists, people of science and rationality, need this kind of insight and experience? – Harris offers a relatively straightforward answer: because of science's inherent limitations. While science is undoubtedly the best method for uncovering the secrets of the physical world, and it can lead to incredible advancements in human well-being, it may never answer questions about the nature of subjective experience or the meaning of life. In Harris' view, a better way to seek answers to these existential questions is by delving into one's mind through what he calls spiritual practice.

The practice he recommends is mindfulness, because, as he argues, being mindful in the present, cultivating mental habits of being continuously in the "now", and attentively observing one's mind is the key to realizing the illusion of the self and living a life free from mental suffering: "The reality of your life is always now. And to realize this, we will see, is liberating. In fact, I think there is nothing more important to understand if you want to be happy in this world" (Harris, 2014, p. 34).

This insight differs greatly from what hundreds of inspired creators and mystics have proclaimed throughout history. It could be said that Harris did not invent a new stream of spirituality but rather showed, in a contemporary way, how its ancient paths can be directed towards atheism and naturalism. This reflects the same endeavor the other authors discussed in this article embraced.

References

Comte-Sponville, A. (2008). *The book of atheist spirituality: An elegant argument for spirituality without God* (trans. N. Huston). Bantam.

Dennett, D. (2006). *Breaking the spell: Religion as a natural phenomenon.* Viking (Penguin).

Du Bois-Reymond, E. (1874). The limits of our knowledge of nature (trans. J. Fitzgerald). *Popular Science Monthly*, *5*, 17–32.

Finkelstein, G. (2013). *Emil du Bois-Reymond: Neuroscience, self, and society in nineteenth-century Germany*. MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9543.001.0001

Freud, S. (1959). *Beyond the pleasure principle* (trans. J. Strachey). W. W. Norton.

Freud, S. (1962). *Civilization and its discontents* (trans. J. Strachey). W.W. Norton.

Haeckel, E. (1895). *Monism as connecting religion and science: The Confession of faith of a man of science* (trans. J. Gilchrist). Adam and Charles Black.

Haeckel, E. (1934). *The riddle of the universe* (trans. J. McCabe). Watts and Company.

Hardy, A. (1979). *The spiritual nature of man: A study of contemporary religious experience*. Clarendon Press.

Harris, S. (2014). *Waking up: A guide to spirituality without religion*. Simon & Schuster.

Hartogsohn, I. (2020). *American trip: set, setting, and the psychedelic experience in the twentieth century*. MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11888.001.0001

Horgan, J. (2003). *Rational mysticism: Dispatches from the border between science and spirituality*. Houghton Mifflin.

Huxley, A. (1977). *Moksha: writings on psychedelics and the visionary experience (1931–1963)*. Chatto & Windus.

Laplanche, J., Pontalis, J. B. (1973). *The language of psychoanalysis* (trans. D. Nicholson-Smith). W. W. Norton.

Marks, J. (1991). *The search for the „Manchurian candidate"*. Norton.

Maslow, A. H. (1959). Cognition of being in the peak experiences. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology: Research and Theory on Human Development*, *94*, 43–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221325.1959.10532434

Maslow, A. H. (1964). *Religions values and peak-experiences*. Ohio State University Press.

McGinn, B. (1991). *The foundations of mysticism*. Crossroad.

Metzinger, T. (2009). *The ego tunnel: The science of the mind and the myth of the self*. Basic Books.

Moreau, J. J. (1973). *Hashish and mental illness* (trans. G. J. Barnett). Raven Press.

Osmond, H. (1957). A review of the clinical effects of psychotomimetic agents. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, *66*(3), 418–434. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.1957.tb40738.x

Rank, O. (1929). *The trauma of birth*. Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., Ltd.

Russell, B. (1917). *Mysticism and logic and other essays*. G. Allen & Unwin LTD. https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.19230

Russell, B. (1997). *Religion and science*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195115512.001.0001

Smith, D. L. (1999). *Freud's philosophy of the unconscious* (vol. 23). Springer Science & Business Media. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-1611-6

Solomon, D. (Ed.). (1964). *LSD: The consciousness-expanding drug.* G. P. Putnam's Sons. https://doi.org/10.1097/00000441-196504000-00017

Yaden, D. B., & Newberg, A. (2022). *The varieties of spiritual experience: 21st century research and perspectives*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190665678.001.0001