

On Some Anthropological Foundations of Spirituality

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Abstract: Taking into account today's progression towards a better notion of spirituality, the development of universal anthropological foundations is of vital importance. They can be found in the classical metaphysical understanding of the human mind. From a practical point of view, spirituality expresses itself in the way people think and behave. To better understand the anthropological foundations of spirituality, we will begin by examining two ways of discovering reality: intuition of being and intuition of good. Looking at these intuitions will give us a better understanding of the issues pertaining to spirituality with its self-transcending dynamism.

Keywords: spirituality, mind, intuition, existence, goodness

In contemporary discourse, spirituality has become an omnipresent subject. There are many ways of defining it. Some associate it with human well-being, while others perceive it closer to the Christian Tradition. In our modern context, spirituality is generally defined as the awareness of a connection to something greater and beyond ourselves, to Transcendence, without necessarily linking spirituality to religion¹. To help us understand the complexity of grasping the meaning of spirituality, Spilka proposes a conception which includes three categories: *God oriented*, closely related to theologies at its basis; *world oriented*, with the focus on ecology and nature; and *humanistic* spirituality, also identified as *people-oriented* with the focus on developing our human potential to the full.² Whatever category we take into consideration, it is evident that spirituality influences how we think and, consequently, how we behave.³

This modern universalization of spirituality demands a closer look in order to find a common foundation for this broader notion. In this article, we propose to take a preliminary look at two ways of bringing us closer to the true definition of spirituality, by exploring both the intuition of being and that of good connected to

¹ Hill *et al.*, "Conceptualizing Religion."

² Spilka, *Spirituality*.

³ James, *The Varieties*.

conscience, as potential foundations for contemporary spirituality. Pointing to these intuitions will hopefully shed some light on issues pertaining to the various ways people experience spirituality nowadays. Of course, an exhaustive description of anthropological foundations of spirituality goes beyond such a short text; it should be taken as pointing to new direction for further research rather than an ultimate presentation of the subject.

When we take a universal approach to spirituality, as a natural dimension of the working of our minds, we come to a very insightful discovery: if spirituality means any human functioning that involves experience, understanding, judgment, and decision, then unless we are in an unconscious states such as in a coma, all other human actions, not only in a religious context, are related to spirituality. We each have a spirit, but often don't make full use of our spirituality be it for good or ill.

If the spiritual is an inherent dimension of the human mind, every human activity is spiritual. This is simply to say that activity that proceeds from the human mind, which is psyche and spirit, must by definition be spiritual. The human spirit shows itself in the generation of a world mediated by meaning and motivated by value. But every human being lives with some set of meanings and values, ideas and ideals, visions and virtues. In part these spiritual components are constitutive of human experience. Indeed, devoid of meanings and values, the distinctive qualities of humanity, an experience could not rightly be called human. Therefore, all human experience is spiritual. All human experience depends on the functioning of the human spirit.⁴

1. Spirituality as Self-Transcendence

When we speak about spirituality, we have in mind something dynamic, we revert to a certain way humans relate to an external reality, to their becoming or something they find at the very core of their being. This becoming can also be understood as self-transcendence or an active surpassing of our self. Karl Rahner proposes an active version of self-transcendence, which he defines as dynamism present in the fundamental constitution of the human being. This dynamism enables us to shape our own identity and improve our own lives. In theological terms, this process is activated by the power of the absolute fullness of being which should be understood as a process where the finite being is empowered to actively self-transcend itself. However, the power of self-transcendence does not originate in the human being. Its roots are Divine.⁵

⁴ Helminiak, "Confounding the Divine," 172.

⁵ Rahner, "Christology."

Daniel Helminiak defines spirituality directly as self-transcendence or the meaning-creating dimension of the human being, which he relates to the human mind.⁶ The understanding of spirituality as our capacity to transcend ourselves was developed earlier by Victor Frankl⁷ as well as by its other proponent Sandra Schneiders, who underlines that self-transcendence directs the person towards the ultimate value, which for many is God.⁸

Spirituality is naturally linked with the mind and its functioning. We will illustrate this link below. According to the above-mentioned authors, within the human mind there is a self-transcending power, which may be called the foundation of spirituality. It has been discussed over the years in philosophy and we can see our capacity of self-transcendence as the spiritual dimension of the human psyche or mind. Bernard Lonergan calls it, intentional consciousness,⁹ or, simply, the human spirit.

According to Lonergan, the human spirit is structured around four interacting dimensions: conscious experience, understanding, judgment, and decision.¹⁰ These dimensions of our spiritual functioning are always interactive: knowledge conditions our decision, which subsequently affects the availability of data for experience, and data in turn condition our understanding and knowledge, and so on. All of them are part of our spirituality.

2. Intuition of Being

One of the most important human experiences is getting to know our own existence. This experience is not the very first one in our lives. Normally, we begin with experiencing the external world. For small children to understand that, when they look in a mirror, they are seeing themselves, requires some preparation and maturity. It takes time to identify what makes up our own existence, our own being. But once we have achieved that, it remains with us for life.

After discovering our very existence, which sometimes invokes the famous Descartes' dictum *cogito ergo sum*, "I think therefore I am," we discover that this existence is only contingent or accidental. For the most part, it is a dramatic discovery. I did not give myself my being and, except in the event of committing suicide, I don't have much control over the end of my life. Moreover, the intuition of being often includes a bold conviction that our existence will not end with the death of our body.

⁶ Helminiak, "Confounding the Divine."

⁷ Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*.

⁸ Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy."

⁹ Lonergan, *Insight*, 519.

¹⁰ Lonergan, *Insight*.

From a philosophical point of view, according to Jacques Maritain, in the human mind we can find existential judgements, meaning statements regarding the existence of things external to us, which are characterized by a certain certitude or conviction of the extra-mental reality of the subject as well as judgments regarding our own existence. To make such a judgment means grasping the being, the existence, the extra-mental *esse* of that subject intuitively.¹¹ This is *l'intuition de l'être*, the intuition of being.¹² Its object, the act of being, drives the actualization of whatever is real in accordance to its potentiality. An intuition of this act of being leads us to the intelligibility of being, (*ratio entis*). We may experience an intuition of being in various ways. Sometimes, this intuition can appear in the course of thinking; in other instances, through a sense of self in sensory or intellectual acts, or again when we experience awe and wonder. Maritain also explains that a child or a poet can have an intuition of being. Already Thomas Aquinas stated that even a child has some grasp of the ultimate end of every moral act, i.e. some grasp of union with God.¹³

We can experience traces of the intuition of being in our everyday free and cognitive acts, simply through the workings of our mind. The significance of common and yet extraordinary acts lies in their nature. They call into play our human freedom. So, indeed, do all human acts. Our free and cognitive acts expand the data from which we can form a concept of being that transcends the physical world.

Our freedom and intelligence are intertwined. Absent an intellectual grasp of possible states of affairs, we could not act freely or responsibly. We could not shape our lives. Absent free choice, we could not think for ourselves; we could only register our sensations. For us, free and intelligent action is an avenue to transcendence. Our quest for transcendence depends on both a cognitive and volitional capacity to go beyond the present moment.¹⁴

Our volitional and cognitive acts are mind-dependent; their existence depends on intellect and will as faculties of the mind (soul). The intuition of being leads us to both the *ratio entis* and the *ratio boni*. The intuition of being is closely related to the intuition of personhood or personal existence and, subsequently, to personal dignity.¹⁵ Intuition of existence or intuition of being is thus closely related to being a human person or existing as a human person, and most probably is well grounded in the structure of our mind. To be a human person means first of all to be. What follows is *spiritualitas sequitur esse*. The very first foundation of human spirituality is the very act of one's existence. Secondly, it is an intuitive knowledge of one's own existence through first discovering the existence of other things in the world.

11 Maritain, "Reflections on Wounded Nature," 220.

12 Maritain, *Existence*.

13 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II, q. 89, a. 6 ad 3; Wipper, "Maritain and Aquinas."

14 Hanink, "In Defense," 175.

15 Hanink, "In Defense."

In his *Commentary on the De Trinitate*, (q. 5, a. 3), Thomas Aquinas calls to mind two operations of the intellect from Aristotle's *De anima*. The first operation is looking to (*respicit*) the very nature of a thing. The second operation is looking to (*respicit*) the very *esse* of the thing, its existence. Although Thomas uses the same Latin verb (*respicit*) to refer to the first operation of intellect in grasping the essence or nature of an object, and its second operation, which is grasping the *esse*, as the act of existence of this thing, they are two distinctive operations of the intellect.

Jacques Maritain observes that the existence of material things is unveiled to us at first through our senses and appears as a concretely determined existing essence. In reality, through our senses we do not have a direct access to pure existence; we get to know something composed of an essence and existence. Nevertheless, the senses attain existence in act without knowing that it is existence and deliver it to the intellect. Only the intellect can recognize existence and give it a name, which originates in existence but does not include existence as such. That name is "being."

Maritain lists a number of different paths that may lead to the intuition of being. Among the paths leading to this intuition on the part of the intellect, he mentions the innate gift of a special intelligence or unexpected natural grace prompted by the sight of a flower, or perhaps our perception of ourselves, or of something suddenly becoming evident to us; we may also move towards it by an inner experience of duration,¹⁶ to name but a few different paths. No matter what path we take, the most important result lies in the releasing of our authentic intellectual intuition, the sense of being (*l'être*), the sense of value that lays in the very act of existing (*l'acte d'exister*),¹⁷ which is the foundation of human spirituality.

Maritain observes that the concept of being springs into our mind at the first awakening of thought, at the first intelligible coming to grips with the experience of our senses while at the same time transcending sense perception. When we point our finger at an object and our eyes see it and our sense power perceives in its blind fashion that "this exists," at the same moment the intellect judges that "this being exists" and expresses it as a certain intellectual concept.¹⁸ In our intellect, in the very heart of the spiritual intimacy of its own operation, we are capable of grasping intuitively ("to see") the being (*l'être*), the existence (*l'exister*) of things as well as the extra-mental existence of that subject. According to Maritain, this is the intuition of being.¹⁹

For spirituality to develop well, we need not only come to the discovery of existence, but, *a fortiori*, we must remain actively aware of it, to be present "here and now", and to return to this awareness as soon as we lose it. In every act of getting to know reality, subjectivity and objectivity are deeply interconnected. This connection

¹⁶ Bergson, *The Creative Mind*.

¹⁷ Wipper, J.F., "Maritain and Aquinas."

¹⁸ Wipper, J.F., "Maritain and Aquinas," 425.

¹⁹ Maritain, "Reflections on Wounded Nature."

becomes visible in an intuitive mode of perception that is a way of perceiving that penetrates beyond the surface of reality and reaches its essence. At the same time, this experience awakens the subjective depths of the spiritual being that we are and brings us to a kind of primordial contact with the world.²⁰

Maritain calls this process “connatural” and describes it as the nature of the correlative relationship between our spiritual core and the reality around us. It is the intuitive sense of a connection between our own consciousness through an intentional emotion and the mysterious participation in the form or quality of existence of Absolute Reality.²¹

Thanks to the human being’s unique intelligence and intuition, it is possible to perceive something of the transcendental aspects of all beings. In the case of the intuition of beauty, it is a unique form of reality. As rational and spiritual beings we are attracted to Beauty and ultimately also to Truth and Goodness.²²

3. Intuition of Good and Conscience

According to Frankl, spirituality operates in the human being through two inexplicable phenomena: awareness and responsibility. The voice of conscience is a particular revelation of spirituality which emerges as a clear process of moral evaluation. Regarding the good, Aquinas asserts that all humans are equipped with some special faculty or habit called *synderesis* that allows us to understand basic ethical principles spontaneously (*Summa Theologiae* 1.79.12.). Similarly to the first principles of being and knowing, ethical principles are neither derived from any previous ones nor are they from any anterior determination. They are simply known by nature. It is clear that some particular actions violate moral order, for example killing innocent children for pleasure, although, as we know, some persons are capable of doing so. For Aristotle and Aquinas, first principles are self-evident, which means that they become clear as soon as the meaning of the term is known such as “the whole is greater than its part.” They are present in the natural light of reason, and make all knowledge possible. They are grasped by direct understanding or intuition and by seeing the absurdity of negating them.²³

Aristotle presents his understanding of the good in the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in which he states that the good has both a transgeneric and analogical character and defines it in a following way: “the good is that which all desire.”²⁴ Also

20 Potter, “Creative Intuition.”

21 Maritain, *Creative Intuition*.

22 Potter, “Creative Intuition.”

23 Brown, *Restoration of Reason*.

24 Aristotle, *Nicomachean ethics* I, c. 1, 1094a 2-3.

Aquinas connects being with the proper character of the good as that which is desirable. A thing is desirable because it is perfect, and is perfect because it is in act, so that the goodness of a thing depends on the actuality of its being.²⁵

When Aquinas speaks of truth and good as divine characteristics, he is aware that ultimately, they are mysteries beyond the full grasp of reason. For Aquinas 'being' is an analogical term and it characterizes first of all the nature of God. God's essence is the same as God's existence. God is the final subject of knowledge (*Beatific Vision*). Also, God is the ultimate goal of the human will. In order to achieve this goal, our will has to be shaped by proper habits or virtues to eventually attain the uncreated good that Aquinas calls the First Cause, i.e. God.²⁶

When we enter into a dialogue with conscience, it reveals to us the existence of an external point of reference conceived as a "higher instance." Conscience is a pre-logical reality, and may be conceived as a pre-moral intuition of values.²⁷ Moreover, Carl Gustav Jung underlines that conscience is the deepest part of a human being (*das wahre Selbst*), which constitutes the essence of the process of individuation.²⁸ Spontaneously, we discover that our conscience, for the most part, functions intuitively; to anticipate something that is yet to come, conscience necessarily has to be based on intuitive processes. Such being the case, we can even say that conscience surpasses rationality.²⁹

It is said that we are servants of our own conscience. If that is the case, Frankl affirms that the voice of conscience must be something other than our own voice. Conscience must be transcendent to the human being. Only then can we grasp the meaning of obedience to the voice of our conscience. Reducing conscience to some neurobiological structures deprives us of the dimension of transcendence. If we want to enter into a dialogue, we need two sides to the dialogue; otherwise, we are dealing with a monologue. Conscience shows us the transcendent nature of the human mind, and the psychological aspect of conscience is only one of its characteristics.³⁰

Conscience also plays a very important role in that it reveals, existing in the human mind, the dependence of freedom on truth, and thus enables human freedom to be self-dependent or self-determined. Only the dependence on truth provides fulfillment to the human person. With these features, conscience becomes the internal authority of the human being which in Christianity is also referred to as "the voice of God".³¹

Conscience is essentially the subjective experience of a norm, as belief in the veracity of certain goodness contained in this norm, which should be put into practice.

²⁵ Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy*.

²⁶ McGinn, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa*.

²⁷ Frankl, *Der unbewußte Gott*.

²⁸ Nowak, *Osoba*.

²⁹ Frankl, *Man's Search*.

³⁰ Frankl, *Man's Search*.

³¹ Galarowicz, *Człowiek jest osobą*.

Only those norms that pertain to action (for example: “Good is to be done and evil to be avoided”) apply directly to the person, while other norms simply define knowledge and do not directly touch the person. The basis of the working of conscience dwells in the human mind, where we find the ability of surrendering human will to truth, which is clearly revealed in the activity of conscience. On this fundamental principle, we can tell that the human person has a “rational nature.” The power to distinguish between moral good and evil is an intrinsic characteristic of the human mind, which is the function of the discerning moral faculty.³²

We always tend towards good. The will, which is part of our mind, is so structured. Intuitively we know that somewhere out there is the Ultimate Good and that only that Good is able to satisfy us entirely. Richard Price Ultimate Good distinguishes intuition from immediate consciousness or feeling and from rational argumentation. He puts forward that intuition should be understood as an immediate awareness by the understanding of self-evident truths or general and abstract ideas.³³

The basic moral propositions are self-evident, i. e., evident in and of themselves. They are not in need of any argument. Self-evident rules such as “one should keep one’s promises,” and self-evident principles are objects of intuition. Today, in some approaches to spirituality, an example of that is given in the form of the Golden Rule present in many religions: “Do not to others what you do not wish done to yourself; and wish for others too, what you desire and long for, for yourself.”³⁴ Our mind has apparently an intuitional dimension to its work, which it applies both to knowledge and to morality. The heuristic capacity of the human mind seems to be closely related to its intuitional dimension. Examples of that are moral beliefs about which we all agree, spontaneous moral judgments adopted independently of any conscious reasoning, and even common-sense intuitions.³⁵

Karol Wojtyła asserts that conscience plays a very important role because it internally binds a person to good, thus becoming a kind of collateral criterion and verification of the fulfillment or failure of the human being.³⁶ It is in the human conscience that the dependency of mind on good is revealed. According to Wojtyła, this is the very centre of human spirituality and its capacity for self-transcendence, which cannot be grasped without linking it to the structures of the person, those of self-governance and self-possession. Only against the background of these structures can we appropriately interpret the dynamism of self-determination where conscience and self-transcendence are rooted.³⁷

32 Galarowicz, *Imię własne człowieka*.

33 Price, “A Review of the Principle Questions.”

34 Pargament, *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy*, 85.

35 McMahan, J., “Moral Intuition.”

36 Wojtyła, “Osoba i czyn.”

37 Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*.

4. Closing Remarks

A recent dynamic development of human interest regarding spirituality makes it important to understand the underpinning causes of this process. When the notion of spirituality becomes all-embracing and thus vague, we need to find some fundamental points of reference for its understanding and, even more, for its assessment. Since the contemporary world has less and less trust in regards to religion, we propose to find sound philosophical foundations for spirituality.

In today's discourse, spirituality is often linked with authenticity, because it requires being true to oneself, which is similar to the existentialist approach. Nonetheless, the human capacity for self-transcendence is more communitarian and reality-oriented than the existential notion, and hence more objective.

Based on the intuition of being and the intuition of good built into the human mind, true and false spiritualities can be distinguished. The above-described dimensions of the human mind with its self-transcending dynamism may help us to better understand the process of becoming a mature spiritual human being. *Animal rationalis* becomes thus *animal spiritualis*. The nature of the mind is profoundly spiritual because it is potentially self-transcending.

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