

An Introduction to Spiritual Psychology: Overview of the Literature, East and West

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This article outlines the philosophical background to spiritual psychology and selectively reviews Western and Eastern literature on the subject. The world views of theism, atheism, and agnosticism are defined and critiqued, and the boundaries of scientific knowledge discussed. The views of James, Jung, and Freud are reviewed, and the contributions of humanistic psychology noted. Contemporary spiritual psychology is then summarized with reference to recent literature on theistic psychotherapy, Buddhist psychology, mind-body medicine, and transpersonal psychology. Sri Aurobindo's work is introduced as a modern Asian perspective on theistic psychology, and his model of the relationship between the "soul" and the unconscious described. Finally, a brief clinical vignette is given. (HARV REV PSYCHIATRY 2004;12:105–115.)

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Before reviewing the literature on spiritual psychology, it is important to state clearly why the subject is relevant at all. Several recent textbooks on religion and mental health summarize a large body of work showing that religion and spirituality are cultural facts, that all treatment is value based, and that religious beliefs and practices can have both positive and negative effects on mental health.^{1–3} These reasons provide a partial explanation of why religion and spirituality are clinically relevant in psychiatric practice, but there are other, more important reasons as well.

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The first reason why spiritual psychology is relevant to clinical practice is because thus far neither science nor philosophy has proved or disproved the existence of soul and spirit, and the nature of consciousness remains a mystery. Therefore, all the knowledge of modern psychology and psychiatry could just as well be interpreted within a theistic framework as within an atheistic or agnostic one. So, when our patients describe religious and spiritual experiences to us, we are immediately confronted with a conundrum: should we view these reports as statements of *belief* that have no relationship to any actual facts of existence, or as *perceptions*—however subjective and partial—of actual spiritual realities?

This dilemma is not a trivial one, yet most discussions of religion and spirituality entirely skip it (two notable exceptions being those of William James⁴ and of P. Scott Richards and Allen Bergin).⁵ It is difficult to explain this glaring omission, other than to surmise that clinicians feel that the dilemma can be avoided by adopting a working philosophy of clinical pragmatism, according to which religion and spirituality are deemed healthy if they are adaptive sources of support and meaning, and unhealthy if not. A little reflection, however, shows this solution to be no solution. While the motivation to be "pragmatic" may be perfectly well intentioned, the problem with the stance itself is that it can be subtly patronizing and unempathic. Why? Because superficial pragmatism is solipsistic; that is, it does not make

any serious attempt to relate religious/spiritual beliefs and experiences to any potential facts of existence. To illustrate this problem, consider the following clinical scenarios:

1. A housewife reports being the victim of domestic violence
2. A young adult relates memories of childhood sexual molestation
3. A man with low self-esteem talks about an absent father and a rejecting mother
4. A nonpsychotic man talks about his faith in God, which he feels is sustaining him through an episode of major depression
5. A bereaved spouse speaks of dreams and unusual occurrences that seem to convey a communication from her departed husband

Typically, in cases 1–3 our first concern would be that the reported domestic violence, sexual abuse, and lack of nurturing actually occurred, and are more than the product of belief systems. And yet with cases 4 and 5, many clinicians would approach such reports as “important religious beliefs,” without pondering whether they could be true reports of spiritual facts. This distinction matters because, therapeutically, there is a big difference between a subtly distancing statement such as “It sounds like that is important to you, so tell me more about your religious beliefs” [subtext: they are just beliefs] and more empathic statements such as “Yes, I can see that only God is getting you through all this” or “Maybe your husband *is* speaking to you, so tell me more about your spiritual life” [subtext: your perceptions are potentially valid]. Atheists and skeptical agnostics may make the first type of statement, but only curious agnostics and theists can make the latter statements and mean them.

Now, this is not to suggest that theists are right and atheists or agnostics wrong. No, the point is simply to show why philosophical questions about the nature of reality cannot be divorced from psychotherapy and psychiatry. Which of the therapeutic statements above is the best one to make depends not only on what patients believe, but also on what the nature of reality actually is. Clinical pragmatism, which is an operationalized form of agnosticism, may or may not be a sufficient model when working with atheistic and agnostic patients, but it risks being implicitly devaluing when working with those who are theistic or even just spiritual (such as non-theistic Buddhists). For how can we honestly claim to “respect” a client’s religious/spiritual life unless we genuinely hold open the possibility that his or her world view may reflect correct perceptions about the actual nature of reality? Some patients, at least, will sense our dissimulation if we pretend to be more open minded than we actually are.

The only way to avoid this pitfall of pseudo-respect is for mental health clinicians to gain competency in thinking about the “big question(s)” of the human condition. No de-

gree in philosophy or theology is required for this purpose; all we need do is pause to review the basic metaphysical stances involved in the age-old debate. The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to do just that. First, the world views of theism, atheism, and agnosticism will be defined and discussed, and the strengths and weaknesses of each summarized. The limitations of agnosticism and the boundaries of scientific knowledge will be analyzed in detail because these are often poorly understood. Second, the Western literature on spiritual psychology will be selectively reviewed, with reference to the previously identified world views. And third, Asian spiritual psychology will be reviewed in order to provide an Eastern perspective on the subject. In this last section, Buddhism will be examined as an example of a non-theistic Asian psychology, and Sri Aurobindo’s work will be introduced as a theistic model (Aurobindo is a major modern Indian thinker). The aim of this essay is not to persuade readers to adopt theistic or Eastern world views, but to illustrate why religion and spirituality might really matter—at least to some patients, sometimes.

PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

There are three major schools of thought about the ultimate nature of reality, and virtually all psychological and scientific models of mind can be classified as belonging to one of these three, which are defined as follows:

1. *Theism* is the belief in the existence of God (a supreme being or spiritual reality), an immortal soul, or any other type of deity or deities
2. *Atheism* is the belief in the nonexistence of God (or any type of soul or deity), which in the modern world is often expressed as the materialist hypothesis that matter is the only reality
3. *Agnosticism* is the belief that the question of whether or not God (or any type of soul or deity) exists either has not been or cannot be answered⁶

In this article, the phrase “soul and spirit” is used in a theistic sense. Note that at times both Eastern and Western thinkers have chosen to remain silent on the question of God or supreme being/reality (as did the Buddha), have maintained the question is linguistically meaningless (Wittgenstein),⁷ or have even given deliberately nonsensical answers (as in Zen).⁸ For this study, all such non-answers are classified as variants of agnosticism, as are purely phenomenological studies of consciousness that decline to comment on the ultimate nature of reality.

The pros and cons of theism and atheism are generally so well known that we need only summarize the main points. In short, the strengths of theism are its historical persistence and per capita dominance amongst diverse cultures,

its contributions to the arts and humanities, and its potential usefulness as a method of coping with the vicissitudes of life. Its principal weaknesses are divergent views on the nature of God (supreme being/reality); the frequent association of religion with repression, fanaticism, cults, and war; and the perennial problem of explaining evil, pain, and suffering if God is benevolent, or of explaining why an omnipotent creator should choose to be malevolent to us. By contrast, the strengths of atheism are its support of rational discourse, its tendency to challenge corrupt religious institutions and archaic beliefs, the compelling presence and power of the material universe in which we live, and the absence of definite proof that there is some other nonmaterial reality beyond it. The weaknesses of atheism are its existential bleakness, its relatively small numbers of adherents in most cultures (none of whom can be found in foxholes), and its inability to prove that God does not exist.

The situation with agnosticism (and phenomenology) is more complicated, due primarily to the remarkable technological achievements of science, so we shall analyze agnosticism in greater depth here. To begin with, let us note that science is often wrongly equated with atheism, whereas the scientific method is, properly speaking, agnostic. Science does not *prove* that matter is the only reality. Instead, science starts with the operational *assumption* that it can fruitfully apply the experimental method only to material events, forces, and processes that are quantifiable, repeatable, and measurable. It can say nothing about immeasurable and unique material phenomena (which may well exist) or about nonmaterial forces, beings, and events, because neither of these can be subjected to the experimental method. Therefore, science ought not to be invoked as an arbiter of truth in debates on the ultimate nature of reality, although it is an excellent tool for investigating the material universe.⁷

Andrew Newberg and Eugene d'Aquili's extensive work^{9,10} on the neuropsychology of spiritual experience provides an apt illustration of this first point. These investigators have carefully reviewed the world's literature on spiritual and mystical experiences, taken it seriously, and tried to develop a neurophysiological model to explain the spectrum of experiences reported cross-culturally. They have tested this model using a variety of technologies, most recently with single photon emission computed tomography to scan the brains of healthy Tibetan monks and Franciscan nuns absorbed in meditation and prayer, and have reported fascinating findings consistent with their proposed model. Despite all this otherwise excellent work, however, they have committed the logical error of assuming that because certain spiritual experiences are *correlated* with a particular neural substrate, the brain therefore *causes* (or creates) these states.^{11–13} It may, indeed, be the case that there is no soul or God independent of matter, and experiences of such are created solely by the brain. Nevertheless, it is equally possible

that the brain is simply a substrate for *perceiving* spiritual truths that exist in their own right. In other words, the brain may transmit, rather than generate, consciousness—much as a radio or television transmits an invisible signal.

Coming from a Western background, James hinted at this possibility in his conclusion to *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:⁴

The whole drift of my education goes to persuade me that the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and that those other worlds must contain experiences which have a meaning for our life also; and that although in the main their experiences and those of this world keep discrete, yet the two become contiguous at certain points, and higher energies filter in.

Coming from the tradition of Indian philosophy, Aurobindo¹² stated the argument even more explicitly when he wrote:

Materialism indeed insists that, whatever the extension of consciousness, it is a material phenomenon inseparable from our physical organs and not their utiliser but their result. This orthodox contention, however, is no longer able to hold the field against the tide of increasing knowledge. Its explanations are becoming more and more inadequate and strained. It is becoming always clearer that not only does the capacity of our total consciousness far exceed that of our organs, the senses, the nerves, the brain, but that even for our ordinary thought and consciousness these organs are only their habitual instruments and not their generators . . . Our physical organism no more causes or explains thought and consciousness than the construction of an engine causes or explains the motive-power of steam or electricity. The force is anterior, not the physical instrument.

Although James and Aurobindo may both be wrong, nothing in science definitively disproves them. Indeed, some scientific research lends more credence to their arguments, not less. First, the findings of modern physics (relativity and quantum theory) completely discredit the simplistic notions of space, time, and causality that most of us take for granted in daily life,^{14,15} and show matter to be far more mysterious and problematic than psychological and neurophysiological models of mind generally assume.^{16,17} Second, although the psychical research (parapsychology) of James's and Aurobindo's day was admittedly weak, Larry Dossey¹⁸ has argued that the methodology of contemporary nonlocal research (which posits that consciousness is not entirely "local" to, or caused by, the brain) is much improved and often quite strong. For example, some of the latest studies of intercessory prayer,^{19,20} telepathic mental influence,^{21,22} and distant healing²³ do give pause for thought.¹³ While none of these developments proves that soul and spirit exist

(because nonlocal phenomenon could be caused by quantum effects at the level of subatomic matter, not by the intrusion into matter of a spiritual reality), they do at least provide a basis for entertaining the hypothesis that they might.

Still, the above discussion merely establishes that scientists ought to remain curiously agnostic—and not that theism is right or agnosticism wrong. The main limitation of agnosticism as a world view was best articulated by Blaise Pascal, one of the founders of the scientific method. In his famous “wager,”²⁴ Pascal argued that if one approaches the problem of whether or not to believe in God (supreme being/reality) as a betting situation, then clearly agnosticism is a bad bet. While atheism and theism each (a priori) have a 50% chance of being right, agnosticism has a 100% certainty of being wrong eventually, once all of the data is collected in this world or another. For no matter what the limitations of our current knowledge may be, in the final analysis God either exists or does not. This assertion is true as a matter of both logic and common sense; there is no meaningful “neither,” “in between,” or “both/and” scenario.

Although various schools of Eastern philosophy have developed models of logic other than the either/or model that Pascal employs,²⁵ Aurobindo¹² has expounded at great length why such intermediate and indeterminate positions are not satisfying. Moreover, even within the non-theistic tradition of Buddhism (which is the most subtle and sophisticated form of agnosticism), some of its later schools questioned the historical Buddha’s silence on the issue of soul and God, and on that basis reincorporated theistic elements and a positive conception of an absolute reality.²⁵ Thus, agnosticism has limitations from both Western and Eastern perspectives.

Clinically, the main relevance of all the above is that soul and spirit *may be*—not *are*—real, and that agnosticism, although temporarily “correct,” is destined to be wrong eventually. If clinicians grasp these two simple points, then they will be able to listen to their clients’ religious and spiritual histories with a new ear. With this perspective in mind, we may now proceed to review the literature on spiritual psychology in an interpretive fashion.

SPIRITUAL PSYCHOLOGY: THE WESTERN VIEW

Although spirituality has had a long history in Western philosophy, theology, and literature, Western spiritual psychology really begins with James’s classic, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.⁴ The hallmark of his approach (aside from his literary talent) is his clear understanding of the unavoidable philosophical issues at stake and the need to study spiritual experience in its own right, without reducing it always to other putative causes, whether biological or psychological. He trenchantly critiqued reductionistic materialism and

countered the notion that all spiritual experiences can be explained by sublimated libidinal impulses. He also courageously maintained that mystical states of consciousness—however elusive and contentious they be—stand at the very epicenter of spiritual psychology. James was a theist but used a phenomenological approach to consciousness as a heuristic model for psychology. His exploration of spiritual psychology is still more insightful than most of what is written on the subject today.

After James, C. G. Jung was the next major thinker to deal with spiritual psychology. A friend of James, Jung was a talented and widely experienced clinician who worked the entire spectrum of illness from profound psychosis to high-functioning neurosis. This range of experience allowed Jung to approach the interaction between soul and psyche in more clinically relevant ways than James. Leaving aside Jung’s many contributions to psychotherapy and psychiatry that have been noted elsewhere,^{26,27} what interests us here is that, contrary to the claims of his detractors, Jung did not accept theism either easily or naively. Biographical evidence shows that he vacillated between theism and agnosticism for most of his life, at times interpreting spiritual experiences and parapsychological phenomena as manifestations of the psyche (the unconscious), and at other times as evidence of the actual existence of soul and spirit. Jung did not settle on theism until his final years.²⁸ His last autobiographical statements lucidly lay out the central philosophical dilemma of psychology and adduce the evidence that led him to believe in life after death. Here, Jung clearly shows that he focused on mythology, the collective unconscious, and the “God-image” (rather than God as fact) because these phenomena were personally and clinically available to him, and not because he failed to grasp that soul and spirit may exist independently.²⁹

In contrast to Jung, Sigmund Freud oscillated between atheistic and agnostic world views. The preponderance of his thought tended toward atheism,³⁰ but he did revert to agnosticism when challenged by an opponent whom he respected—which is precisely what happened when Romain Rolland, the noted French writer and humanist, wrote Freud to query him about the etiology of mystical experiences. Rolland was a minor mystic himself and was then writing his classic biography of Ramakrishna (1836–86), the Hindu saint whose life abounded in such experiences. Freud’s answer to Rolland, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*,³¹ is to interpret the famous “oceanic feeling” as caused by an unresolved pre-oedipal wish for symbiotic fusion with the mother. Rolland respectfully disagreed, and the two maintained an amicable correspondence on the subject thereafter, which William Parsons³² has analyzed insightfully. Parsons reviews the contemporary literature on mysticism and psychoanalysis in depth, and proposes an interpretive framework that gives equal weight to cultural studies, developmental

psychology, the diverse schools of psychoanalysis, and theistic psychology. For our purposes here, the main point is captured in Freud's own statement of agnosticism to Rolland (as quoted by Parsons):

Just one more thing: I am not an out-and-out skeptic. Of one thing I am absolutely positive: there are things we cannot know now.

With my warmest wishes for your well-being
Your devoted
Freud

In the 1950s and early 1960s, the work of Viktor Frankl, Carl Rogers, Rollo May, and Abraham Maslow brought a new existential and humanistic focus into Western (and especially American) psychology. This body of work remained largely agnostic, however, and when dealing with religious beliefs and spiritual experiences, it treated them more as important sources of human meaning than as perceptions of spiritual facts.³³ The strength of this work is its wide clinical applicability (there are, indeed, few situations in therapy where a humanistic stance is harmful), and it is particularly useful when therapist and client come from different religious/spiritual backgrounds but can agree to meet around the importance of finding personal meaning. The inherent limitations of agnosticism still apply, however, to the humanistic stance. Partly in recognition of these limitations, and partly in response to some of the excesses of humanistic psychology that transpired at Esalen Institute in the 1960s, at the end of his life Maslow helped found transpersonal psychology (discussed in the next section),³³ which went on in the 1970s to embrace theism.

In the 1980s, within the mainstream of dynamic psychotherapy, Ana-Maria Rizzuto³⁴ reexamined the analytic stance on religious faith/belief, and concluded that the intrapsychic structure of God-representation parallels the development of other object relations. Although Rizzuto's work treated "God" as a purely psychological construct—and thus remains agnostic—it did permit psychoanalysis to recapture religious belief as a valid domain of therapy. She also correctly identified atheism as a type of faith in the nonexistence of God, and studied the psychodynamics thereof. During that same time period, James Fowler³⁵ published important studies on the development of faith across the life span, approaching religiosity within an Eriksonian model of ego development (augmented by the work of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg). Erik Erikson's³⁶ stages of the life cycle are clearly humanistic and agnostic, and whatever "spirituality" there is in his expanding spheres of generativity and notion of "virtue," it is moral/ethical rather than theistic. By contrast, Fowler³⁵ described faith development as moving toward a relationship of trust in "a transcendent center of value and power," but he remained vague about whether

this transcendent locus is an actually existing supreme being/reality or merely a hypothetical target for belief and affective investment that may not exist *per se*.

Today, many mainstream analysts and therapists have gone one step beyond Fowler and are now exploring theistic frameworks for psychotherapy, among them W. W. Meissner,³⁷ Toksoz Karasu,³⁸ Richards and Bergin,⁵ and Len Sperry.³⁹ These contemporary thinkers, who write mostly from a Judeo-Christian perspective, posit that soul and spirit are real, although apprehended by the individual within a biopsychosocial milieu (meaning that both spiritual and psychodynamic interpretations of religious belief may be valid). These therapists are not averse to praying with and for patients at times, or to making dynamic interpretations at other times. They tend to view prayer both as a method of potentially contacting an actual supreme being/reality and as a psychologically meaningful process. The strengths of this work are its willingness to take religious beliefs and spiritual experiences at face value (sometimes), and its solid grounding in the accumulated wisdom of mainstream psychodynamic therapy. Its weaknesses are those of all theism (i.e., it could be wrong in the end) and its limited awareness of the much older tradition of Asian spiritual psychology that is increasingly impinging on its domain of discourse.

Other important contemporary developments in Western spiritual psychology include the continued growth of 12-step programs for substance abuse and other addictive disorders,⁴⁰ as well as hospice care and psycho-oncology.⁴¹ In these two, independent clinical traditions, spirituality is taken seriously and theistic world views are accepted, according to patient preference and provider comfort level. Moreover, new educational initiatives have introduced curricula on religion and spirituality into the training of psychiatric residents.⁴²⁻⁴⁴

EASTERN SPIRITUAL PSYCHOLOGY

There are two perspectives from which to review the ancient tradition of Eastern (Asian) spiritual psychology: what the West has said about, or in reaction to, Eastern thought; and what the East has to say about itself and about the West. We shall start with the first and proceed to the second.

The two largest religious/spiritual traditions in Asia are Buddhism and Hinduism, both of which have developed sophisticated systems of spiritual psychology in which philosophy and religion are not divorced from psychology as they typically are in the West. Of these two major traditions (space does not permit reviewing smaller ones, such as Taoism), Buddhism has made a larger impact on Western psychology thus far. One important reason for this differential impact is that many schools of Buddhism are

non-theistic, as the historical Buddha chose to remain silent about the ultimate nature of reality. Although the Buddha's contemplative silence was qualitatively different from the intellectual agnosticism of Western philosophy, the Buddha's non-theism is closer to the world view of Western science than is the floridly polymorphic monotheism of Hindu thought.^{13,25} It is true that Tibetan Buddhism contains theistic elements and that one might interpret some of the Dalai Lama's teachings⁴⁵ on compassion and loving-kindness as an evocation of the "soul," but such subtleties pass beyond the scope of this discussion.

Historically, a key figure in the introduction of Buddhism into Western psychology was D. T. Suzuki, a Japanese Zen master who collaborated with Erich Fromm to produce the first major synthesis of psychoanalysis and Buddhist thought.⁴⁶ Suzuki and Fromm concluded that there are important areas of agreement between Buddhist psychology and psychoanalysis, but also some differences. For instance, Suzuki maintained that the "original mind" of Zen is not the same thing as the Freudian unconscious, and that the experience of Zen *satori* (enlightenment) cannot be reduced to psychodynamic causes. Suzuki also influenced Karen Horney and other psychologists of the post-World War II era.³³ Anthony Molino⁴⁷ has edited an excellent compendium of essays that traces the fertile dialogue between psychoanalysis and Buddhism from 1924 to present; in this volume Suzuki's remarks on the relationship between metaphysics and psychology provide a welcome counterpoint to the other authors' neglect of this centrally important matter.

Today, the Buddhist influence is seen in empirical research on both mind-body medicine and psychotherapy. Herbert Benson's pioneering work on meditation and the relaxation response⁴⁸ has been replicated and extended in studies of Buddhist "mindfulness" meditation (nonjudgmental awareness of the moment), which show that this type of practice ameliorates symptoms of anxiety,^{49,50} chronic pain,^{51,52} and fibromyalgia.⁵³ Also, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's extensive work on "flow" states as constituting optimal psychological experience is entirely consonant with the notion of mindfulness, although Csikszentmihalyi does not identify himself as Buddhist.⁵⁴ In psychotherapy proper, Marsha Linehan,⁵⁵ who trained in Zen, combined simple notions of mindfulness with cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) to craft dialectical behavior therapy (DBT). Her synthesis of Eastern and Western ideas^{56,57} is no small feat, as DBT is the first therapy experimentally proven to reduce self-destructive behavior in borderline personality disorder. Note that Linehan's model of DBT is agnostic, however, and thus at root is just a sophisticated form of CBT inspired by Buddhist techniques.

In terms of psychodynamic therapy, several theorists have sought to integrate Buddhist psychology with contemporary therapy,^{58,59} and there is much interest in using psy-

chotherapy as a complement to spiritual practice within the American Buddhist community.⁶⁰ One especially lucid synthesis of psychoanalysis and Buddhist psychology is Mark Epstein's recent work on the subject,⁶¹ which we shall take as representative here. The essence of agnostic Buddhist psychology, as Epstein explains, lies in using mindfulness (open awareness of the moment) and *vipassana* meditation (focused concentration) to reveal the "self" as a fluid construct that has no permanent, objective identity. In order to be able to observe one's own psychological processes with such detachment requires, as a foundation, the development of what the analytic tradition calls a well-functioning observing ego. Epstein thus resolves the implicit tension between the Buddhist quest for "no self" and the psychotherapeutic mission to build a mature ego, by proposing that Buddhist meditation practices do not literally ablate the ego, but rather develop the observing ego in ways that therapy alone does not. Like Linehan's DBT, Epstein's synthesis of Buddhism and psychoanalysis is agnostic.

By contrast, Hindu spiritual philosophy is theistic and has exerted some influence on transpersonal psychology. The term "transpersonal" refers to the central developmental paradigm of this school, which posits that psychospiritual growth proceeds from pre-personal and then personal stages of identity formation, to finally transpersonal ones. Transpersonalists argue that the pre-personal and personal stages have been well described in psychoanalysis and developmental psychology, but that the transpersonal stages are based primarily on spiritual and mystical experiences described by Jung and both Western and Eastern spiritual traditions.⁶² For example, Roger Walsh, Bryan Wittine, and Frances Vaughan,⁶³ as well as Stan Grof,¹⁷ Grant Cortright,⁶⁴ and Ken Wilber,⁶⁵ all reference both Hindu and Buddhist philosophy liberally, and they tend to interpret the reported Hindu experience of a transcendent self (*atman*) as being psychologically equivalent to the enlightenment (*satori*, Buddhahood, or original-mind) of Buddhism. Walsh and Vaughan⁶² and Cortright⁶⁴ also help clarify some of Jung's confusing statements about the transpersonal "Self," while Cortright's discussion of transpersonal psychotherapy⁶⁴ is well informed, is at times appropriately critical of the field, and thoughtfully addresses the problem of spiritual bypassing (i.e., using spiritual practices as a defense to avoid ego conflicts and deficits). A relative weakness in Western transpersonal psychology, however, is a tendency to underplay the potentially significant philosophical differences between theistic and non-theistic schools of Eastern philosophy.

The East—Seen from the East

If we turn now to the East and look for an Asian spokesperson to explain how the East sees itself and the West, the field of suitable candidates is small—primarily Suzuki

(mentioned above), the current Dalai Lama (who is interested in neuroscience),⁶⁶ and Aurobindo (1872–1950). Of these three, Aurobindo is best suited for the task because he was educated at Cambridge University and fluent in English, made substantial innovations within the field of Eastern spiritual philosophy, and is highly regarded in India as both a father of the modern Indian nation and a leading spiritual figure.^{25,67}

To give an analogy that will be meaningful to Western readers, Aurobindo is to Eastern spiritual philosophy what Einstein is to physics. While accepting the experiential insights of both Hindu yoga (spiritual practice) and Buddhist phenomenology, Aurobindo went beyond this classical wisdom to propose a new world view in which spirit and matter are seen as interacting in an evolutionary fashion. In his magnum opus on spiritual philosophy, *The Life Divine*,¹² Aurobindo interprets biological evolution as being the result, rather than the cause, of the evolution of consciousness. For Aurobindo, “consciousness” is a continuum in which absolute transcendent spirit is one extreme, and physical matter the other, of an all-compassing divine reality. Thus, through an anterior process of “involution,” the transcendent godhead (*satchitananda* of Indian philosophy) delimits or compresses itself into apparently unconscious matter and then progressively releases itself via a secondary process of evolution that reemerges from matter. On earth, this evolution of consciousness has been revealed across time and space in the progressive increase in sentient awareness (intelligence) seen in the evolution of life from inanimate matter through unicellular organisms, plants, lower animals, mammals, and, finally, human beings.

Aurobindo¹² argues that the logical extension of such a theistic view of matter is that evolution is not done. If God exists and the material universe is a field of dormant divine substance, then it follows that human intelligence is not the highest possible manifestation of consciousness on earth. Aurobindo coined the term “supermind” to describe the next, higher level of consciousness that he believes will manifest on earth—first and partially, in human beings as far as human nature permits, but later and fully, through a biologically transformed life form that will exceed the human being in the capacity for consciousness as far as human beings currently exceed other animals. Western science currently eschews such teleological thinking and views the increasing neural complexity seen in the evolutionary tree as merely an epiphenomenon of random genetic mutation and selective pressure. Aurobindo notes, however, that this Western interpretation of the data rests upon the unproven assumptions of materialism, which he questions. Aurobindo’s ideas do bear important similarities to those of Christian thinkers such as G. W. F. Hegel, who wrote before him, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin,^{68,69} who wrote after him.⁷ By contrast, however, Aurobindo’s work develops

evolutionary theism further than theirs, was derived independently from the ancient tradition of Indian thought, and is grounded in a sophisticated empirical method (yoga)⁷² for making philosophical postulates a living psychological experience.

Aurobindo’s notion of a supramental evolution on earth is his fundamental contribution to Eastern philosophy, and it represents a new paradigm for spiritual psychology. Obviously, Aurobindo’s ideas are bold and challenging, and his predictions about the future quite possibly wrong. Only time—and probably a lot of it—will tell. Nonetheless, his ideas can, in several ways, be useful to Western psychology as a heuristic model of theistic psychology. First, Aurobindo accepts the experiential data of Indian non-dualism (*advaita vedanta*) and Buddhist non-theistic psychology, but incorporates them into a larger theistic framework that shares important elements in common with Western monotheistic traditions. Second, Aurobindo extends the growth orientation of humanistic/transpersonal psychology to its logical endpoint by positing that both consciousness and biological life forms will continue a developmental trajectory in the future. And third, by virtue of his interest in changing human nature, Aurobindo was led^{70,71} to grapple seriously with territory familiar to Western therapists—character structure, ego defense mechanisms, and the unconscious.

Aurobindo’s Spiritual Psychology

Aurobindo’s model of the evolution of consciousness has two main areas of relevance to Western spiritual psychology. One is his subtle and detailed phenomenology of consciousness, which is most germane to transpersonal psychologists who are trying to make sense of a variety of expanded states of consciousness. The other is his clear application of theistic psychology to the labor of ego transformation, which is more immediately relevant to mainstream Western psychotherapy. Due to limited space, we will address only the second topic here.

One of Aurobindo’s most useful ideas, both theoretically and practically, is his differentiation of the *psychic being* (the individual soul) from the *subliminal being* (a “subtle,” or nonmaterial, complex of several layers of consciousness that stand between the soul proper and the outer nexus of mind, life, and body).⁷¹ In Aurobindo’s view, the subliminal dimension of human consciousness accounts for most of the reported “paranormal” phenomena studied in parapsychology, including telepathy, precognition, out-of-body and near-death experiences, lucid dreams, Jungian “synchronicity” (acausal meaningful coincidences), and the resurgence of Jungian archetypes from the collective unconscious. From the Aurobindonian perspective, Jung’s memoirs²⁹ reveal a richly developed subliminal awareness. It is important to note, however, that while the subliminal

being is nonmaterial and thus can extend itself across or outside time and space to some degree (as Jung noted), it is not the soul proper, which is a deeper and more essential dimension of consciousness.

Aurobindo¹² calls the true soul the “psychic being,” drawing his expression from the Greek root *psyche*, and defines it as an individual portion or delegate of the supreme being/reality that is immortal, but that also evolves through the process of reincarnation as it grows in its capacity to manifest the divine consciousness in the world. Thus, for Aurobindo, the first goal of transformative psychospiritual practice is to bring this psychic consciousness forward into the outer personality and to use it to gradually modify the normal functioning of the human ego. In the following quotation, Aurobindo describes his conception of the psychic being (evolving soul) and differentiates it from the transcendent self (*atman*) of Indian philosophy:

The true soul secret in us . . . is not situated below the threshold of waking mind, but rather burns in the temple of the inmost heart behind the thick screen of an ignorant mind, life and body, not subliminal but behind the veil—this veiled psychic entity is the flame of Godhead always alight within us, inextinguishable even by that dense unconsciousness of any spiritual self within which obscures our outward nature. It is a flame born out of the Divine and, luminous inhabitant of the Ignorance, grows in it till it is able to turn it towards the Knowledge. It is the concealed Witness and Control, the hidden Guide, the Daemon of Socrates, the inner light or inner voice of the mystic. It is that which endures and is imperishable in us from birth to birth, untouched by death, decay or corruption, an indestructible spark of the Divine. Not the unborn Self or Atman, for the Self even in presiding over the existence of the individual is aware always of its universality and transcendence, it [the psychic being] is yet its deputy in the forms of Nature, the individual soul, *caitya purusa*, supporting mind, life and body, standing behind the mental, the vital, the subtle-physical being in us and watching and profiting by their development and experience.

For Aurobindo, the psychic being (evolving soul) corresponds to the immortal soul of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theology—only he accepts the Eastern notion of reincarnation. He affirms the value of transcendental awareness (Hindu *atman*, Buddhist *nirvana* or *satori*) but feels that the actual purpose of such states is to support the more dynamic and life-affirming activity of the psychic being. Aurobindo⁷² also distinguishes the psychic being from the outer personality structure (self and ego) described in Western psychology—which forms the basis for differentiating between ego-defensive and ego-transformative spirituality.

But the most intimate character of the psychic is its pressure towards the Divine through a sacred love, joy and oneness. It is a divine Love that it seeks most, it is the love of the Divine that is its spur, its goal, its star of Truth shining over the luminous cave of the nascent or the still obscure cradle of the newborn godhead within us. In the first long stage of its growth and immature existence it [the psychic being] has leaned on earthly love, affection, tenderness, goodwill, compassion, benevolence, on all beauty and gentleness and fineness and light and strength and courage, on all that can help to refine and purify the grossness and commonness of human nature; but it knows how mixed are these human movements at their best and at their worst how fallen and stamped with the mark of ego and self-deceptive sentimental falsehood and the lower self profiting by the imitation of a soul-movement. At once, emerging, it is ready and eager to break all the old ties and imperfect emotional activities and replace them by a greater spiritual Truth of love and oneness.

Thus, Aurobindo sees personality organization as a product of the evolving *interaction* between the inner, spiritual nucleus of individual identity (psychic being) and the outer, biopsychosocial operations of the ego. From the Aurobindonian perspective, two modern figures who demonstrate strong psychic (soul) traits include Mother Teresa and the current Dalai Lama, whose supernormal altruism flows from founts deeper than the ego.

Soul, Ego, and the Unconscious

As implied in the last quotation above, Aurobindo was under no illusions about the operations of the ego and the unconscious. Although he never read Freud or Jung (but heard discussions about them),⁷⁰ his letters⁷³ to students note the operation of primitive drives and ego defense mechanisms, using his own terminology. The following passage lucidly describes the relation of dreams to the unconscious (which he calls the “subconscious”) and the difficulty of changing character structure:

The subconscious is universal as well as individual. . . [A]ll that is consciously experienced sinks down into the subconscious, not as precise though submerged memories but as obscure yet obstinate impressions of experience, and these can come up any time as dreams, as mechanical repetitions of past thought, feelings, action, etc., as “complexes” exploding into action and event, etc., etc. The subconscious is the main cause why all things repeat themselves and nothing ever gets changed except in appearance. It is the cause why people say character cannot be changed.

Aurobindo's⁷³ recommendation for how to work with the unconscious is that people become conscious of the psychic being (soul) *before* trying to work through the depths of the unconscious. He recommends this approach because the psychic being (and the higher planes of consciousness) have *more power* to illuminate and alter ego functioning than mental willpower and analysis do. When a disciple who tried psychoanalysis in the 1930s explained that process to him, Aurobindo criticized the early analytic strategy of quickly unearthing oedipal conflicts:

If one wishes to purify and transform the nature [of one's character], it is the power of these higher ranges to which one must open and raise to them and change by them both the subliminal and the surface being. . . . But to begin by opening up the lower subconscious, risking to raise up all that is foul or obscure in it, is to go out of one's way to invite trouble. First, one should make the higher mind and vital strong and firm and full of light and peace from above; afterwards one can open up or even dive into the subconscious with more safety and some chance of a rapid and successful change.

Admittedly, the field of psychotherapy has advanced since Aurobindo wrote this letter, so half of his criticism no longer applies. Today most analysts would follow Aurobindo's advice and seek to develop a stable observing ego ("make the higher mind and vital strong and firm") before diving into oedipal issues, while therapists working in CBT, DBT, interpersonal, or even short-term dynamic models would de-emphasize transference or avoid interpretations about the unconscious altogether. However, Aurobindo's notion of using the psychic being (true soul) to guide the long labor of ego-transformation might still be of interest to theists who are trying to reconcile Buddhism and Eastern psychology with Western psychotherapy. Of course, like all theists East and West, Aurobindo could be wrong in the end, in which case his model of consciousness would have to be reduced to refined neurophysiological models of spiritual experience, or perhaps to nonlocal effects and quantum theory.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

Clinically, the primary utility of the philosophical material described in this article is that it provides a rational basis for suspending disbelief in the possible existence of soul and spirit—without thereby surrendering common sense or sacrificing the known benefits of psychotherapy and psychopharmacology. Because scientific knowledge has inherent boundaries, and because both theistic and Eastern world views are as plausible and internally consistent as those of atheism and Western science, there is every reason to view patients' religious/spiritual beliefs and experiences as potentially valid.

The following excerpt of dialogue from a nonpsychotic patient in the author's practice illustrates that implementing a spiritually informed approach to treatment is not difficult and that it entails neither preaching nor philosophizing. This woman, who is Catholic but has an emerging interest in Buddhism, presented shortly after her husband Sam died of cancer. Just before his death, he had an episode of unresponsiveness after which he said to her, "I went to a golden land, where there were some glowing beings and everyone was happy. I think I'm going back there soon. Everything is okay. Don't worry." One of my therapy sessions with the patient included the following exchange:

Patient: These strange things have been happening, you know, one night I felt like someone was brushing a feather across my face. Then at the office some chimes on the refrigerator just started tinkling out of nowhere. My friends heard it, and everyone said it must be Sam. . . . Later I went to a psychic. I didn't tell her anything about Sam, but she described his whole illness and said that he had come to caress my face one night, and then played some music for me the next day. . . . You probably think I'm crazy.

Therapist: Not at all. Maybe Sam's soul did come to you. What do you think?

Patient: Yeah, I think so. [silence, followed by tears]

Therapist: You really miss him, don't you?

Patient: [through sobs and tears] Yeah. . . . but I know he's in a better place. He suffered so much, the cancer was horrible.

Therapist: Yes, he suffered terribly.

After the above exchange, the grief work proceeded as usual, and we discussed a book that she was reading about life after death. At the end of the session, she requested a refill of lorazepam (as needed) for episodic anxiety and insomnia, which I gave her.

While it is easy for theistic therapists to respond as above, sincerely open-minded (and open-hearted) agnostics should be able to do likewise without prevarication, especially if they understand the limitations of agnosticism outlined in this article. Atheism and agnosticism are, of course, still tenable world views, but therapists who hold them should be wary of devaluing theistic clients and should understand that theistic clients may rightly restrict their emotional involvement in therapy in order to protect themselves against the negative judgments of skeptical therapists. Finally, note that it is illogical to think that schizophrenic delusions, manic hyperreligiosity, and schizotypal superstitions preclude the possible existence of soul and spirit, and there is also no reason to suppose that patients with psychotic-spectrum disorders cannot also engage in legitimate religious and spiritual pursuits when clinically stable. Indeed, one of the goals of spiritually informed treatment would be to

help such individuals worship the God of their understanding in a safe and appropriate fashion—after all, they have a civil right to do so.

CONCLUSION

This article has selectively reviewed both Western and Eastern literature on spiritual psychology, focusing on the underlying philosophical issues that are central to the topic. It has also introduced Aurobindo's work as a contemporary statement of theistic Asian psychology. The main limitation of this article is that it covers a broad range of issues in a summary fashion and gives limited clinical correlations. Further clinically oriented work would be useful.

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