

The Spiritual Reach of the Human Mind
(*Universalist*, January 1986, 16/12)

James Hemming

Kipling, you will remember, said:

There are nine and sixty ways
Of constructing tribal lays
And every single one of them is right.

There are something like the same number of ways of talking about mind, brain, personality, spirituality, and the nature of human experience, and many of the various proponents—not universalists need I add—are inclined to claim that their particular interpretation is ‘right’, to the exclusion of all others.

My task, as I see it, is to try to bring the disparate spectrum of views into some sort of focus within the context of contemporary thought.

For a start, we must, I think, seek to dispel that hoary old confusion that the spiritual and the nonspiritual are two worlds that are as unmixable as oil and water. This view represented the mundane as ignoble, gross and base whereas the spiritual was supposed to be noble, refined and holy. Newton gave this false dichotomy its first jolt when he showed that motion—formerly regarded as of divine origin—was the outcome of natural forces. Einstein finished off the job with his famous $E = mc^2$ which linked energy and matter as aspects of one another. Traditionally, energy had been thought of as a spiritual essence while matter was regarded as an altogether inferior entity. This erstwhile tendency to make absolute distinctions between different aspects of reality now has to give way to concepts of interaction, interflow and holism.

That by way of background. To get closer to our theme we must start by taking on board definitions to work from. For a definition of ‘spiritual’ I will turn to the Shorter Oxford Dictionary, selecting two of the range of definitions on offer. One reads, “Of, pertaining to, affecting, or concerning, the spirit or higher moral qualities, especially

as regarded in a religious aspect”; another, “Of, or pertaining to, or emanating from the intellect or higher faculties of mind”.

We might expand and unify these two definitions by saying that ‘spiritual’ entails a special sort of relationship between the individual and the universe often characterized as religious in the broad sense of the word. In considering the spiritual, we are concerned with the clarification of vision. A spadeful of wet soil can be seen as just dirt or as the basis of all life. So with everything: we must try, as Blake said, to see not only with, but through, the eye.

As for what we mean by ‘the human mind’, I suggest we may well follow John Searle in his recent Reith Lectures. He defined mind as: “The sequence of thoughts, feelings and experiences that go to make up our mental life”.

If we are to review the range of the human mind, we must also take into account the capacities of the brain because all modes of experiencing and doing are marked by appropriate neural activity. Thus, the brain is the instrument of life in all its aspects: apprehending, relating, evaluating, choosing, doing.

This brings us to the need to clarify what we mean by ‘mind’ and ‘brain’ in the context of the spiritual mode of awareness and action. Intention, purpose, decision, will, creativity, and the other manifestations of mind are spiritual functions, but they themselves depend on a well-nourished, developed and grown neural infrastructure, which is what the mature brain is. This mind/brain relationship has not yet been fully worked out. Suppose I am occupied with a problem; an idea comes into my head; I reach for a book to make a check on something, consult the index, find the relevant pages, feel a bound of delight if my hunch seems to be confirmed; put the book back disconsolately if it isn’t, reach for another. . . . If we could explain in full what is going on in that simple series of happenings we should have the nature of mind open to our understanding. But, of course, we can’t. Inevitably, then, a study of the spiritual reach of the human mind takes us into areas where there are many gaps in our knowledge. We shall, here, be able to make only a short journey into what is still, largely, unknown territory.

Right on the threshold of our exploration we stumble upon a mystery in the way the brain carries its messages. As I am sure you know, all experience is conveyed by electric/chemical impulses passing along nerve fibres and across synaptic junctions. If impulses are set off through the eye, they are carried to the visual cortex at the back of our heads and we see. If impulses—identical impulses—are set off through the ear, they are carried to the auditory cortex at the sides of our heads and we hear. Similarly for the other neural messages that produce consciousness: touch, pain, temperature, and the rest. This neural activity is basically a single set of impulses. What makes the difference in experience is how the brain interprets the messages that reach it from the environment. All the wonder and beauty of existence is encoded in these neural patterns. Thus, our picture of the world, made up of what we see, hear, smell, touch and the rest, is created within the brain. ‘Out there’ are only forces, masses, shapes and surfaces.

Let us take a specific instance of this remarkable phenomenon. On that table over there we see a bowl of daffodils. What exactly does that mean? Light from the sun travels 93 million miles and reaches the surface of those flowers. Most of the light is absorbed but certain wavelengths are reflected and picked up by our eyes and we are aware not only of green, and shades of yellow, but—beauty. And, since all our brains operate to the same principles, we not only apprehend beauty in our own subjective worlds but can also share it. And in that sharing we find a unity of spiritual experiences.

I am putting emphasis on brain function because that has, in the past, been too much disregarded in the consideration of spiritual experience. The brain is now considered to be the most amazing piece of matter in the entire universe. Furthermore, and herein lies much hope for the future, the human brain as the organ of our lives is commonly undereducated and misused. Thus, there is a great potential in reserve. Julian Huxley once wrote:

We are beginning to realize that even the most fortunate of people are living far below capacity and that most human beings develop not more than a small fraction of their potential and spiritual efficiency.

Incidentally, when we talk of the brain as the organ of spiritual, as of all other, experience, we are not speaking of the mechanical stimulus-response system, as described by the behaviourists, but of an organ in constant creative activity, energized biologically, and steered by its subjective aspect—the mind. The whole system is engaged in striving to move from a minus situation to a plus situation; striving to get beyond what is into what might be. That is to say, each mind/brain is a dynamic part of a dynamic universe with spiritual awareness as the accolade on significant experiences.

At this point we must take a further look at the unexplained phenomenon of surplus capacity. We used to be told that all behaviour boiled down to the struggle for survival. But human powers carry within them a potential that far exceeds what is necessary for mere survival. That humankind—along with other animals—should have developed limbs, movement and balance is explicable enough in terms of raw survival. Walking, running, climbing, carrying, even fighting sometimes, have obvious survival values. But how are we to explain such an exquisite phenomenon as the dancing of Torvil and Dean? Utilitarian explanations collapse before such enchanting beauty. And so it is with all the arts.

This overplus of potential also appears when a new opportunity for human creativity occurs, as with the invention of the aeroplane. In no time at all we are hearing of ‘born pilots’ and ‘born computer operators’. Such potent skills seem to lie dormant within the psyche until the opportunity for expression comes; then they burst out. No one has yet explained how this comes about. Innovation is, in evolutionary terms, liable to be dangerous, but we find ourselves, as a species, driven towards innovation. We ‘are our genes’ but the genes required to respond to the new seem always on hand.

What has this to do with spirituality? The experience of successful innovation has been described as ecstasy. To carry the evolution of human knowledge forward a little, to extend the range of human experience, so as to make that human knowledge effective in action is, in essence, of the spirit. The insects, in species terms, are perfect survivors but not notably spiritual; we are vulnerable

because of our perpetual hunger to transcend. Our surplus powers make transcendence possible. Spirituality is not something beyond ourselves; it is an enduring potential with us.

Not only humanity as a species but individuals, too, strive to move 'from a minus to a plus'. 'We rise', as Tennyson put it, 'on the stepping stones of our dead selves to higher things'. The time has come in this brief survey of mind and spirit to ask 'What higher things?'

I suggest that by 'higher experience' we mean a more complete apprehension of what is, a more involved responsibility for what should be. Jung said that, as we live and grow, we should become ever more indissolubly united with the world of living things and objects around us. This means ever more concerned with what the world should become. Through living with such involvement we begin to participate in creation itself. And that brings us towards ultimate unity with what is, a state in which we both find personal fulfilment and lose ourselves in the whole. That is the spiritual maturity of which the mystics have spoken and written throughout history. We may, perhaps, describe this awareness—following Eastern thought—as personal perception of the ground state of no-thing-ness from which all events and objects emerge. At this point in experience, brain, mind and spirit are at one.

The journey towards this apprehension of the whole—from which spring both a knowing and a call to action—is threefold. One journey is the journey into truth. This is the journey of science, philosophy and religion. The 'passion to understand', as Sir Bernard Lovell has called it, is a spiritual passion.

So, too, is the quest for beauty. Beauty, as we have already noted, eludes simplistic explanations. Why is the nature around us not only useful but also beautiful in a non-utilitarian way? Why does the fantastic display of flowers around the globe which was evolved to attract insects and ensure fertilization also attract us? Why are a peacock's tail, the leap of a panther, the markings on a butterfly's wing beautiful in our eyes? What do we share with the apprehensions of the honey bee?

Again, when we uncovered the sub-microscopic world, there, too, was beauty in the simple elegance of crystals and the delicate structure of a minute spore. The telescope, for its part, took us further into the grandeur of the night sky. So beauty is an aspect of the entire universe and our brains are its organ of expression. We can enter into this universe of beauty because our senses are attuned to perceive it.

We may note, at this point, that our sense of beauty may be blinded by an excess of purely utilitarian purpose, or by an excess of anxiety. But, if those obstructions are cleared, and our perceptions educated by experience, beauty blazes out at us with breath-taking impact. We should also note that, if the brain is not educated to enjoy beauty, it may be relatively insensitive to it. “Discovery comes to the prepared mind,” said Pasteur. So does transforming experience.

We have followed Truth and Beauty from the word to the experience, from the idea to the illumination. Let us now try to do this for Goodness also.

I suggest that goodness towards others is the very root of spirituality. The person too much boxed into his, or her, egocentricity is a person with a seriously curtailed spiritual range. Isolation is limitation. The movement towards the spiritual dimension is through love, and love, in its turn, is the acme of feeling for others—social feeling as Adler called it.

I think it is relevant to note, at this point, that social feeling is specifically catered for in the structure of the brain. It would be odd if this were not so, as we are a social species. Three streams of research have combined to show that the frontal lobes of the cortex are the seat of social intelligence. The major source of information has come from accidents—and war. A second source has been the study of the effects of brain lesions. In addition, information has been drawn from brain surgery undertaken to alleviate epilepsy, depression, or some other malfunctioning. Graham Powell in *Brain and Personality* sums up the effects of lesions in the frontal lobes: “less concern for others, selfishness, diminished regard for appearance, irritability”. Incidentally, these frontal lobe injuries may have no, or little, influence on Intelligence Quotient while having a devastating effect on what we

might call the Social Quotient or even—for they are closely linked—the Spiritual Quotient.

Throughout history there has been a slow expansion of social awareness and responsibility until today we reach something approaching the position of Thomas Paine: “My country is the world and my religion is to do good”.

The brain is powerfully equipped to attain this level of apprehension and involvement, but it needs appropriate nourishment and experience from education, and life, if it is to reach maturity as the instrument for generating and sustaining social intelligence, which underpins our capacity to perceive the needs of others.

So those time-honoured signposts of the human spirit—Truth, Beauty and Goodness—together lead us to high order consciousness or ‘spirituality’.

We should notice how this level of consciousness fits into the hierarchy of consciousness, in terms of which we all have our being. Consciousness may be considered as operating at five levels. At the rudimentary level comes sensory response to physical stimuli: a pin prick, the warmth of sunshine, the taste of food. At the next stage, we have awareness of the environment, including awareness of other creatures. These first two levels of consciousness we share with our fellow animals. At the next higher level comes self-consciousness, the perception of oneself as a living being. Only human beings and a few other animals attain this in a developed form.

At the fourth stage comes the consciousness of time as past and future as well as now. This stage finds the human species on its own so far as we know. Curiosity about what has happened and what will happen brings with it such functions as evaluation and planning. Finally, we reach higher consciousness: intention, imagination, moral principles, sensitivity, compassion and the other aspects of high order functioning. At this level comes the awareness of involvement in the whole: cosmic consciousness, manifest as finely tuned awareness; an aesthetic joy in all things lovely; a caring that embraces all life; an acceptance of responsibility for the future.

This higher consciousness, which is the core and partner of spirituality, is not a continuous state in human experience. It comes and goes. The ultimate seems transformingly clear for a short time, then the good moment slips away and confusion intervenes again. The ecstasy of beauty, fully and sensitively apprehended, shines and fades. Egocentricity, hopefully outgrown, may come roaring back. Matthew Arnold summed all this up:

We cannot kindle when we will
 The fire which in the heart resides;
 The spirit bloweth and is still,
 In mystery our soul abides;
 But tasks in hours of insight will'd
 Can be through hours of gloom fulfill'd.

I suggest that as, and when, we experience higher consciousness we are experiencing the actual point of the evolution of consciousness as it moves from the limited and mundane to the universal and transcendent. To quote Ruth Nanda Anshen: "Today we stand on the threshold of a new consciousness".

What then, we may ask, is the ultimate range of the human mind? We cannot tell. Neurologically speaking, the brain contains a considerable mass of tissue the role of which has so far eluded investigation. There is plenty in reserve, as we have already noted.

Just as the apprehension and consciousness of modern man vastly exceeds the apprehension and consciousness of early man, so there must still be great advances to achieve. What we now consider exceptional spiritual experience may lead on to a more generalized enhancement of sensitivity and awareness.

If our species avoids self-destruction, there is no telling what new revelations and possibilities lie ahead. After all, is not the entire incredible array of organized energy in the universe moving towards the release of more life, more mind, more advances of the spirit? Fred Hoyle, and other leading scientists, are, at any rate, beginning to talk in these terms.

May we not, perhaps, regard the spiritual dimension as the guide

and goal of human evolution: the passion to know; the passion to appreciate; the passion to relate; the passion to release the creative powers of ourselves and one another; the passion to love and be loved.

All this is well within the powers of the human mind—as long as we bring ourselves close to one another by cooperation instead of shattering our humanity and spirituality by confrontation and competition.

The choice facing us is, I suggest, clear. We have to choose truth, beauty and goodness so firmly that the lies, squalor and greed that corrupt the world—and threaten the future—shed away.

Whether or not we succeed in that as a species is the ultimate test of the spiritual reach of the human mind.

References

- Adler, A. *Social Interest: A Challenge to Mankind*. Faber and Faber. 1938.
- Arnold, M. 'Morality' in *Poems of Matthew Arnold*, Blackie and Son. 1906.
- Davis, P. *God and the New Physics*. Dent. 1983.
- Hoyle, F. *The Intelligent Universe*. Michael Joseph. 1983.
- Huxley, J. 'Transhumanism' in *New Bottles for New Wine*. Chatto and Windus. 1957.
- Lovell, B. *In The Centre of the Immensities*. Hutchinson. 1979.
- Powell, G. E. *Brain and Personality*. Saxon House. 1979.
- Searle, J. *Brains, Mind and Science*. B.B.C. 1984.