



The Enlightenment



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Spirituality Includes Many Concepts Beyond Religion

By Goldwin Emerson

Acceptance of each other is an easy phrase to embrace in our minds, if not in our daily practices. When we believe that others share our ideas, philosophy, politics or our religion, it is easy to accept them. Conversely, acceptance is more difficult when others do not share our way of thinking and acting. In spite of this, many conscientious people respect the religious choices, political views, occupational choices, ethnicity and culture of those who differ from them and they try hard to be pluralistic and accepting without abandoning their own moral values.

As a secular person who holds humanist views, I suppose to some of my religious acquaintances, humanism and spirituality seem to be opposites. It is true that humanists sometimes feel uncomfortable about the term spirituality. We think the term “spirituality” ought to be expanded to include concepts beyond strictly religious terms. Humanists choose words like awe, wonder, fulfillment, inner peace, enrichment and acceptance. Spirituality is also about human connections with animals, nature and with our fellow human beings.

A common perception of some of my religious friends is their belief that humanists lack feelings of joy, compassion and wonder. For religious believers, spiritual experiences are expressed in traditional religious terms as though one could not be spiritual without being a believer in God. Although this reasoning is inaccurate, it is a matter of concern since it can become a barrier between humanists and non-humanists in understanding each other.

Humanists use the term “wonder” in referring to the natural world which offers experiences of awe, excitement and joy in the present. Humanists hope that thoughtful people will use good judgment and good moral values to use their ability to be rational in order to make positive things happen in this world, here and now. Religious friends ask me how I can be hopeful about human beings when there is so much around us that is not right. To be sure, it is easy to find examples of poverty, pollution, disease, war, starvation and crime. But these unfortunate conditions come about over the years, not by accident, nor by lack of prayer, but by poor decisions made by humans. If such problems are to be solved in the future, it will be by humans applying their best efforts. We need to have confidence that human beings are capable of recognizing and implementing good solutions to problems, many of which are caused by previous poor

human actions or thoughtless decisions. We need to apply rational and caring solutions whether we do so within or without religion.

Spirituality for both humanists and non-humanists alike remains. I am convinced I share the joys and concerns of the world as readily as my religious friends. I share with humanists and non-humanists alike, joy at the birth of a baby, happiness at the sound of children playing, satisfaction in helping those in need and gratefulness in receiving unexpected help from a stranger. I shed tears at the bedside of a dying friend. I marvel at the metamorphosis of a caterpillar turning into a beautiful butterfly. I am thrilled by the music of Mozart, the nature paintings of Robert Bateman, the beauty of the Taj Mahal, and I am delighted by the goldfinches at our bird feeder. I am emotionally enriched by the gift of human love. I am optimistic when I hear political leaders talk of peace rather than war. A scientific discovery promising a cure for a medical problem or a new and better vision of looking at the world gives me a spiritual lift.

Some of my enthusiastically religious friends attribute spirituality to God dwelling beyond nature. I sometimes question whether their beliefs about the supernatural may encourage them too readily to hand over the task of improving our world to a powerful supernatural entity.

Humanists share the emotions of joy and wonder with both religious and non-religious acquaintances. We share these spiritual emotions, not because they flow from heaven, but because they are part of being fully human.

Note: This article first appeared in the London Free Press on Saturday February 16, 2019.

Philosophy Must be Dragged out of the Ivory Towers and Down into the Market Place of Ideas

By Aaron James Wendland

According to one founding myth, philosophy begins with an obstreperous old man being put to death for pestering his fellow citizens about the nature of justice and courage and other such virtues. Needless to say, execution is hardly an auspicious way to start a new academic discipline. But Socrates' death, his characteristic doubt, and his tireless attempt to engage Athenians in dialogue tells us a great deal about the essence of human understanding.

Death indicates a limit on our apprehension of things. To see what this means, imagine the infinite understanding often assigned to God. As an immortal, infallible, and omnipotent creator, God immediately knows every last thing. Indeed, the whole of creation is said to take place within God's being, and this suggests God is always in direct contact with reality. We humans, in contrast, can't see everything. In fact, most of reality stands apart from us as a thought-provoking mystery. And as finite beings, our understanding is always tied to a given perspective on things.

Take a rose, for example. A physicist may say it consists of a certain set of particles and the forces that act between them. A chemist can explain its basic compounds, whereas a biologist might describe the ecosystem required for a rose to grow. An economist can identify its exchange value, an artist may depict its beauty, and a lover ought to appreciate its romantic significance. Each of these perspectives teaches us something about a rose, but none on their own explains all there is to know. So, to expand our

appreciation of the world, we need to accept the incomplete nature of our knowledge, question our own perspective, and adopt alternative points of view.

Socrates, for his part, embraced the finite character of human understanding. “Real wisdom is the property of the gods,” he said when on trial for his life. And he famously claimed his distinctive insight consisted solely in this: “I do not think I know what I do not know.”

Socrates’ rejection of any pretense to divine understanding and his doubt over the extent of his own knowledge drove him to question the customs and traditions of his city. Indeed, he spent most of his days trolling, in both senses, the *agora*: a public square and marketplace where nearly every important debate in Athens took place. Here Socrates would interrupt the daily activities of everyone, from doctors and lawyers to poets and priests, and then he would challenge and press them on their deeply held beliefs.

More often than not, Socrates used his superior skill in the art of argumentation to highlight the limitations, inadequacies, and contradictions in a particular person’s point of view. In doing this, he left many of his interlocutors unconvinced and even gained a reputation as a sophist: a professional orator who could play with words to make the weaker argument the stronger.

Ultimately, Socrates’ irreverence for Athenian practices, his persistent inquiry into the essence of things, and his uncanny ability to annoy his fellow citizens led to his undoing. In fact, his peers found his way of arguing so irritating that a greater percentage of them actually condemned him to death than thought he was guilty of impiety and corrupting the youth.

Unsurprisingly, Socrates saw his radical questioning in a different light. Specifically, he took himself to be a “gadfly” who, through his stinging criticism, was able to stimulate the reflection required for genuine understanding and a bona-fide education. And while most Athenians were uncomfortable putting their customs and traditions to the test, Socrates developed a following amongst a motley crew of open-minded students, merchants, aristocrats, and dramatists. These disciples took Socrates’ challenge seriously and not only cast doubt on their cultural inheritance but began to formulate new answers to tough questions about happiness, human flourishing, the ethical basis of our actions, and our comprehension of reality itself.

The critical exchanges and fruitful dialogues Socrates initiated with his friends and colleagues defined the subsequent practice of philosophy. Indeed, the Socratic method of asking hard questions in order to encourage reflection, draw out the unwarranted assumptions of an accepted view, and then posit something new characterizes the movement of our intellectual history, generally.

Aristotle, for instance, found fault in Plato’s account of the good life in which reason dominates our unruly passions, and Aristotle’s criticisms paved the way for the Epicurean claim that our passions have a positive role to play in our well-being. Similarly, Einstein’s response to anomalies in Newtonian mechanics led to a shift in our understanding of the universe, and Einstein’s theories were largely responsible for the major technological advances in the 20th century.

With Einstein’s work we have come a long way from a grumpy old man in Ancient Greece accosting his fellow citizens in the *agora*, and the aim of our new column is precisely to drag philosophy out of the ivory tower and put it back in the marketplace. Practically speaking, we plan to provide a space for publicly minded thinkers to draw on their education and experience in order to address contemporary social,

cultural, and political issues from a philosophical point of view. In doing so, we intend to provide our readers with insightful, intellectually stimulating, and provocative commentary from a slightly different angle.

Following Socrates' lead, the column is also designed to be a site for reasonable debate over contentious issues, with the goal of fostering dialogue between engaged citizens across the ideological spectrum. In short, "Agora: A Market Place of Ideas" is meant to carry on the Socratic legacy – though we certainly hope our contributors are spared Socrates' fate.

*Agora is moderated by Aaron James Wendland, assistant professor of philosophy at the Higher School of Economics and the co-editor of [Wittgenstein and Heidegger](#) and [Heidegger on Technology](#). Follow him on Twitter at [@ajwendland](#). He is running a philosophy series for the *New Statesman*.*

Editors Note. I have often thought it is regretful that modern philosophers tend to write for other philosophers rather than for lay people as well. I am pleased that James Wendland has reminded us of the down-to-earth wisdom of the ancient Greek philosophers. (DAH).

MEDITATION: FOR THE BIRDS, AND BEYOND

By Duncan Watterworth

So far, I'm just Checking In

For the last two winters, our band of kayaking snowbirds has met on Monday mornings to practice Qi Gong on the threadbare carpet of the rec room above the volunteer fire hall in Alligator Point, on the Florida Panhandle.

Barb and I had paddled for three winters with the instructor, Tracy, and her husband Tom, with no idea that she had spent much of her life studying and instructing in various Eastern disciplines. Then she asked the firefighters for a key to the only large room for many kilometres, and we were soon swaying like seaweed in the tide, moving our arms like dragons' wings, and lubricating our joints.

We sampled a smorgasbord of practices. One day, she talked us through a body scan meditation. We laid on that carpet, tried to silence our minds, and focus awareness on our bodies, one part at a time.

We learned how to "Check In" - a sort of mini-meditation, to be done repeatedly throughout the day. All it takes is to turn your attention to the "here-and-now" for a few seconds, draw a few breaths, and "notice" your surroundings and interior condition. In the fire hall, I suddenly noticed the birds that had been chirping near the open window, and the waves grinding on the Gulf beach.

In my lifetime I have started, and quit, a regular meditation practice at least three times. My self-discipline fails. At least Checking In is easy. Meditation-lite.

Meditation goes back at least as far as Buddha, 2,500 years ago. Recently, variations have been secularized and commoditized, and prescribed for stress, better sleep, and chronic pain. A recent newspaper story touts meditation as "one component of your overall health recipe", and for "letting go of toxic thoughts".

Basic meditation is simply sitting and focusing your attention on breathing, or repeating a mantra. When the mind wanders – as it instantly will - you gently lead it back. Repeat a few thousand times. When I meditate, my mind immediately goes walkabout, and must endlessly be hauled back. It can be boring and exasperating simultaneously.

The initial goal of Buddhist meditation is to train the mind, to strengthen the mind's ability to stay focused. Once this ability is developed, a heightened concentration can be brought to bear on anything, within or without.

That would support my desire to go out of my mind - with its incessant chatter - and spend more time in the here-and-now. I want to notice those birds chirping, and soak more reality into my pores. I'm missing so much.

So why is our attention so annoyingly quick to jump the rails? Blame the "default mode network" which neuroscientists have identified in the brain. It kicks in instantly once we complete a goal-oriented task and sends our thoughts hither and yon.

This is described in "Why Buddhism Is True", the provocatively titled 2017 book by scholar and veteran science writer Robert Wright. He suggests that the dominance of the default mode network can be "diluted" by sufficient meditation.

Wright investigates whether modern neuroscience and psychology support any of Buddha's core psychological insights, while expressly bypassing the "supernatural" stuff like reincarnation.

The book examines Buddha's beliefs that: human suffering and discomfort are caused by excessive cravings, desires, and attachments; that we are not nearly as in-control of our thoughts and behaviors as we think; and that these can be remedied by following his "Eightfold Path", which includes mindfulness and concentration.

But that's a lot to think about, when I'm still trying to Check In with the birdsong. Some of this may have to wait for my next lifetime.

Atheism and Atheists

The word Atheism is derived from the Ancient Greek *ἄθεος* (*atheos*) meaning "without gods"; godless; secular; denying or disdaining the gods, especially officially sanctioned gods is the absence or rejection of the belief that deities exist. The English term was used at least as early as the sixteenth century and atheistic ideas and their influence have a longer history. Over the centuries, atheists have supported their lack of belief in gods through a variety of avenues, including scientific, philosophical, and ideological notions. (Wikipedia).

As the existence of God began to be questioned in the sixteenth century by philosophers and others, the words atheist and atheism began to appear and were gradually used more often as societies began to become more secular. Today the words are heard often, sometimes in a pejorative sense, such as when evangelical Christians call atheists agents of the devil. To get around this negative connotation, some non-believers prefer to use the terms agnostic or free thinker.

Atheism came to the forefront in the first decade of the 21st century with the publication of four books by the so called “four horsemen.” Sam Harris –*The End of Faith* – 2004, Richard Dawkins – *The God Delusion* – 2006, Daniel Dennett - *Breaking the Spell* – 2006, and Christopher Hitchens – *God is Not Great: Religion Poisons Everything* – 2007. These books became best sellers in some circles, but they were oftentimes preaching to the converted. It is not likely that many devout believers in God became non-believers thanks to reading one or more of these books.

And there were criticisms. Some complained that adamant died-in-the-wool atheists were just as objectionable as evangelical Christians. Others stated the problem with the word atheism is that it states what a person does *not* believe, but nothing about what they *do* believe.

Recently I saw a televised debate in which Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris debated with two Jewish Rabbis. The topic was: is there an afterlife. Nobody won the debate, but afterwards Sam Harris admitted that atheists have a problem when they talk about what they do not believe, without mentioning what they do believe. For instance, how do atheists substitute for the joy and satisfaction believers get from their religion? To answer, Harris explained (and I paraphrase) atheists experience great joy from living morally and ethically, while admiring and enjoying the wonders of nature, the creativity of humans in the arts, the achievements of science and technology, while at the same time being loving and compassionate, all wrapped up in a distinctive form of secular spirituality. This is the message atheists, agnostics, free thinkers and all non-believers need to get across to the general public. (DAH).

The IHEU Has a New Name

The International Humanist and Ethical Union has recently changed its name to Humanists International. What is Humanists International? Founded in 1952 in Amsterdam, Holland, by five national humanist associations, Humanists International is the global representative body of the humanist movement, uniting a diversity of non-religious organisations and individuals. Their members include more than 160 humanist, rationalist, secular, ethical culture, atheist, and freethought organisations in more than 70 countries. Their current headquarters are in London England.

Concurrent with the name change, a new website has been developed and can be found at: <https://humanists.international>. The IHEU definition of humanism and the seven principles of the Amsterdam Declaration have remained unchanged. These and a wealth of other information can be obtained on the website.

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