

# You and I: Psycho-Spiritual Health and the Voice of Love

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## ABSTRACT

As therapists, we regularly observe the extent to which our patients are distanced from a voice of love or compassion toward themselves and others (e.g., inner good voice, benevolent superego, good internal object, spirit of love, God). We believe the extent to which one realizes an intimate relationship to this voice (through the tangible mediation of loving others) is the defining measure of psycho-spiritual health. As such, the curative power of “love” is grounded in a tangible relationship with a self-transcendent good that is not reducible to simply subjective experience, affect, behavior, or social interaction. To that end, the present paper aims to examine some individual, group, and collective psycho-spiritual health implications of a case wherein a patient experienced a moment of “spiritual perfection,” during which he felt “immersed in a self-transcendent spirit of love” that brought with it a sense of self-actualization. While the experience lasted, the patient reported a vivid sense that intentional wrongdoing harmed himself far more than others, and psycho-spiritual health was directly bound with loving others. Methodologically, we approach this case from both a multidisciplinary and psychologically integrative “phenomenological” viewpoint that may speak to our patients as well as to a more professional audience, with two primary goals in view: first, to define and demonstrate the importance of this “love,” and second, to elucidate the process by which individuals might operationalize and examine it in a reasoned, methodological, and testable fashion. Through this case, we hope to provide readers with an appreciation for the utility of such an experience and knowledge, in particular as it relates to overcoming issues related to addiction, freedom, and power that can enable us to become more and better than we are.

**Key Words:** love, faith, compassion, moral law, perfection

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## Introduction

As therapists, we regularly observe the extent to which our patients are distanced from a “voice of love” or compassion toward themselves and others (e.g., inner good voice, benevolent superego, good internal object, spirit of love, God), instead often reporting an over-emphasis on hedonism on one hand, or a felt lack of

meaning and fulfillment in the world in general. As discussed at length by Frankl (1964; 1967; 1975; 1992), self actualization and happiness (feeling good) comes as a consequence of connecting with this voice and its associated sense of meaning, rather than from direct pursuit of “happiness,” itself. In line with this, the authors suggest that the extent to which one connects with this voice (through the tangible mediation of loving others) is the defining measure of psycho-spiritual health, and that the curative power of “love” is grounded in a tangible relationship with a self-transcendent good that is not reducible to subjective belief, affect or feeling, behavior, or social relationships alone. The authors further argue that this voice is directly accessible to individuals via their every day experiences.

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The present paper aims to explore this “inner voice,” and presents techniques for identifying it via an Experiential Realism (ER) approach to knowledge. Specifically, the authors argue that daily experiences may be examined methodologically through the lens of ER to distinguish what is known from what is believed, as well as distinguish rational beliefs from prejudices and blind faith. The present paper also explores individual, group, and collective psycho-spiritual health implications of a case wherein a patient experienced a moment of “spiritual perfection,” during which he felt “immersed in a self-transcendent spirit of love” that brought with it a sense of self-actualization. While the experience lasted, the patient reported a vivid sense that intentional wrongdoing harmed himself far more than others, and that the greatest gift for human life is bound-up with loving others.

## Methods

As discussed in Wyner (1988), the three main epistemological positions (i.e., Hume’s empiricism, Kant’s idealism, and Husserl’s early realism) take for granted that the goal of any practical epistemological research is not the question of *whether* we know (in contrast to the extreme post-modern view, which the authors reject), but rather *how* we know. Specifically, all three positions typically rely on the use of objective experiential knowledge in order to answer these questions of *how*. In his early years, Husserl provided a rigorous realist epistemology outlining this process, distinguishing it from a mere appeal to a naïve or common-sense realism (Willard, 1984). Similarly, Wyner explored such an epistemology in its application to a phenomenology of conscientious action or the power of experiential moral knowledge (Wyner, 1988). To that end, the present paper aims, in part, to explore this methodology in a way that is accessible not only to researchers and clinicians, but to patients as well, by examining the case of Ben, a 25-year-old college student diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder. Through this case, we attempt to demonstrate the relationship between his diagnosis and the aforementioned relationship to that “good inner voice.”

## Experiential Realism

One of the key issues in any experiential model of knowledge is articulating a method for discerning said knowledge from mere belief and blind prejudice. While an in-depth exploration of epistemology is well beyond the scope of this paper, we argue that such an investigation is largely irrelevant: regardless of one’s specific position regarding knowledge vs. belief, virtually all paradigms agree that evidence-based beliefs supersede those without evidence (even the post-modernist will typically agree that beliefs “in alignment with reality” – i.e., beliefs “grounded” in reality, are preferable to those that directly contradict one’s experiences) (e.g., Orange, 1995; Stolorow *et al.*, 2002). Even experimental quantitative research fundamentally adheres to the same principle: repeatability and consistency of experienced measures are the primary metrics, not the measurements themselves. Further, these experiences are rarely personal: instead, researchers typically rely upon the experiences of their test subjects, attempting to discern consistent, repeatable patterns in order to ascertain the truth (i.e., knowledge). For physical phenomena, this process is often straightforward: simply engage in the process and measure the outcome. It is no coincidence, given the ease with which quantifiable data can be analyzed, that we often bestow upon such quantitative research greater significance than their qualitative counterparts. How, then, can these qualitative phenomena be investigated with equal rigor?

When we watch a movie or read a novel, there is a sense in which we recognize, even in the context of unrealistic fictional stories, an accessible truth within it. Like the myths that pervade every culture in our collective history, these truths are typically identified by the extent to which they mirror our own experience. In other words, there is a consistency of experience grounded precisely in its objective features despite having subjective features not shared by others. Indeed, if this were not true, communication in the sense of shared ideas would not be possible. We are connected to one another in such a way that understanding the experience of others helps us better understand our own. These experiences extend to all aspects of our being, be they the so-called “unconscious” of Psychoanalysis, the objects of Gestalt, the schemas of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy, or the interpersonal feedback loops of Family Systems. Such experiences, adequately understood, may



have the most profoundly practical and clinical significance for our individual and collective life.

To review, this is not an appeal to blind faith, but to knowledge through experience. It is an elucidation of how humans can know in a general sense and increasingly refine that knowledge, rather than know nothing unless they know everything. It emphasizes the importance of approaching “knowing” on a continuum rather than the borderline, black-and-white approach often taken by orthodox reductionists. In this way, we may explore a phenomenological approach for navigating that continuum of knowing rather than remaining trapped in the untenable need to either know everything or know nothing at all.

### *Phenomenological Investigation*

For the purposes of this paper, “phenomenological investigation” is defined as the practical exploration of how we know what we do in fact know in order to distinguish it from what we don’t. And this by providing an elucidation of the parts, properties, relations and so forth involved in the knowing act, as outlined previously in Wyner (1988). Specifically, the authors utilize the stance of Husserl’s “intentionality” as a unique referential quality of the mind (rather than Hume’s reduction of experience to something akin to “representational quanta”, or internal replicas of sense impressions). To clarify, this is not an investigation of mere subjective thought or affective experience, but rather the utilization of those experiences in order to more fully understand a real, verifiable event or concept.

Consider, for example, a child that touches a candle flame. Upon touching the flame, the child pulls away their hand and experiences fire as hot. Through this experience, the child now knows that “fire is hot”. This experience is consistent and repeatable – others who touch the fire will similarly experience it as hot, and the child can engage in numerous follow-up tests of the fire to better understand it (e.g., set paper on fire). Further investigation may reveal both a *relative* nature to this experience (a person with gloves may not perceive the heat from the flame), and a subjective nature (no one - not even I - experiences this particular pain, in this specific time, place, manner, etc.). But, at no point is the experience as a whole merely *subjective* – the fire

possesses intrinsic energy levels that lead to the burning of human skin, regardless of the investigative modality. Similarly, complex psychological questions may be approached using the same epistemological starting point: the question is not whether we know, but how we know it and how we can know it better and more clearly.

To this end, the present study investigates the extent to which one can rigorously examine, through consistent, repeatable experience, moral knowledge and the “inner voice” that can lead to a sense of fulfillment and meaning in one’s life. Specifically, the authors present a case study that highlights how a patient may engage in this personal exploration in order to more fully identify and refine that voice, and develop a meaningful, interpersonally consistent, verifiable knowledge of those moral values that transcend mere “subjective” experience.

### **Case Study: Ben**

Ben is a 25-year-old philosophy grad student with previously undiagnosed Borderline Personality Disorder. In particular, Ben struggles with extreme emotional states and “black and white” thinking: when slighted by family or friends, Ben often jumps between idealizing and hating them, resulting in intense anger, sadness, and despair. He describes a history of reckless and sometimes dangerous behavior during his teenage years, including car accidents and physical altercations.

During his first year of college, Ben states that he took an introductory psychology course in which he was told that, according to Freud, one’s personality is pretty much fixed by the time one is 4 or 5 years of age. During class, Ben asked how a patient with “severely disturbed parents” might receive treatment, and was informed by the professor that such a patient would be considered “unanalyzable,” and that treatment would be limited to symptom management rather than core personality change. Ben, taking the professor’s claim at face value, in conjunction with general difficulties trusting others, becomes severely depressed and suicidal.

In particular, Ben admits to a past history of parental abuse, alienation, and demoralization. He describes feeling confused about the purpose of his life, as well as life more generally. He reports ongoing suicidal ideation and a related



core sense of “emptiness.”

### *The Drive*

Decades later, Ben reports a “transcendent experience” while driving to work. In his words:

*As I'm driving over Coldwater Canyon to work, I'm struck by the beauty of this particular sunrise on this particular morning in a way that stands out from so many other sunrises and mornings. I wonder why. I notice the sky is especially clear and blue, and that the colors of the trees seem much more vivid and alive. I watch a flock of birds dancing together as one, and I feel the coming of spring as I notice new white blossoms on some trees. I recite to myself a favorite quote by Rainer Maria Rilke (1992) that begins, 'Being an artist means not reckoning and counting, but ripening like a tree that does not force its sap and stands confident in the storms of spring that after them may come no summer...' I recite another quote by William Law (1893) that begins, 'Divine love is perfect peace and joy, it is a freedom from all disquiet, it is all content, and mere happiness, and makes every thing to rejoice in itself.' And a single word seems to summarize what I feel: gratitude. I feel grateful. And it calls forth countless other experiences of this kind over the duration of my life. Moved by gratitude, I find myself thinking of specific people in my life who had suffered. I want to stand with them in their suffering. I want to help them make sense of it, insofar as I can. I send two of them a text just to say I'm thinking of them.*

During this experience, Ben reports wondering why this particular morning “seems so vibrant.” He states that in the moment he reacted to the experience by considering recent events and experiences, but cannot pinpoint any specific antecedent that could account for this sudden, intense experience. Upon further reflection, he admits a certain ambivalence regarding his motivation for this exploration: on one hand, he yearns to hold on to this present moment just as he wanted to hold on to similar experiences in his past; but on the other hand, the more he tries to hold on, the more they seem to fly out of reach like an elusive butterfly. He also states that, during this reflection, he is suddenly reminded of

numerous similar, albeit less intense, experiences “like so many sunsets, or the response of the inmates standing in the yard of a prison in the film, *Shawshank Redemption*, in response to an aria.” In particular, however, he recalls one experience “so unusually good and powerful that it not only indelibly imprinted itself on my life history, but fundamentally altered the subsequent direction of my life.”

In general, Ben acknowledges a common thread of being able to “be in the moment” with experiences that share something in common, even acknowledging a certain similarity to traumatic experiences of his past when he was unable to escape from the moment (albeit in a negative, rather than positive light).

### *Into the Desert*

Ben says he was in his mid 20's and although he had made some real progress in his search for meaning for his life, still felt submerged in the cold sea of an indifferent world in a way that drove him to search for something that could fill the deep void he felt in himself and in the world around him. He was not only confused about what he should do with his life, but ambivalent about whether there was any reason to live at all.

But through the mediation of a few tangible caring individuals he had met, e.g., a therapist roommate and a philosophy teacher, he found himself increasingly looking for people throughout human history who had suffered the same kind of emptiness he was suffering and who had left a written record of their experiences for those who came after them. In one sense, their experiences were subjectively and culturally foreign to him in a way that could not speak to his condition. But in back of them he increasingly observed the sense of an underlying sameness akin to the way different people might describe the same landscape in the course of ascending the same mountain, out of the same valley of darkness and despair. And just like such a journey, there were differences in what they had seen and could bear witness to; in the vividness and richness of detail as well as in the fullness of their descriptions. Most of all, despite feeling less alone in finding siblings in a similar darkness, he also found siblings akin to guides much further along the road than he had travelled. Like Plato's Allegory of the Cave (1875a), each of these guides provided some form and measure of a



manifestation or incarnation of light about the core of reality itself, as being good and beautiful and which made life seem pregnant with meaning and value. In a word, he sensed that *they* had seen something he had not: that reality might be contained or held by *love*.

And so, influenced by their example, he decided to go into “the desert” to disengage from a so-called “normal” crazy world – like the bizarre world of Kafka stories (1971), or the coldly indifferent world of Jones Very (1883). He chose solitude, silence, and fasting as means of separating himself from all the ways he was running from his fear of this world: no internet or television, no ordinary discourse with others, no sex or food or work as usual. And this to engage more intimately with that spirit of love he sensed speaking in and through a spiritual community that crossed time, place, and even vast differences in belief since it included professed atheists along with professed Jewish, Christian, Sufi, Buddhist, Hindu, Native American, and other believers.

### *The Moment of Meeting*

Ben describes the “moment of meeting” as follows:

*While engaged in reading, meditation, and contemplative prayer, I suddenly and unexpectedly experienced something like countless “gifts” I had experienced before, but something that reached much deeper and far more powerful and seemed to illuminate experiences from my past in an extraordinarily new way. I felt loved. Loved as I had never felt loved in my life and yet there was no tangible individual loving me. Like Charles Finney's description of his experience (1977), it was like “waves of liquid love;” yet instead of fanning me, I felt this love melting into me and/or me into it, connecting me to everything. I felt loved just as I was, in spite of all my real and/or imagined sins and shortcomings. Not that the bad things I had done in my life were washed away in the sense of being erased, but as if they were not held against me. There was a felt lack of judgment, condemnation or wrath as if a voice said, ‘You can learn even from your sins. You can use them to understand and love yourself and others.’ In that moment, I felt a*

*seemingly unlimited horizon of possibilities open up, as if I could be more than I was, better than I was, even transform my life and the life of my world as I knew it. And this by the power of this Spirit of love who was giving herself to me and which I strangely recognized had been with me all my life. I felt ‘free to love.’ And I couldn't stop joyfully repeating that phrase over and over again, ‘I'm free to love. I'm free to love.’ The mere idea of intentionally doing what I knew was wrong seemed like intentionally wallowing in shit. I simply had no desire for it and couldn't understand how I ever could before. I sensed the reality of a law of love: that who and what we choose to love we allow to define who we are and can become. I felt power flowing into me unlike any power I had ever felt before: the power to love. A power that seemed to define the meaning of life itself and in so doing transformed how death appeared to me before. In that moment I was not afraid of death. And it seemed to me as if there was nothing anyone or anything could do to me that could separate me from that love and that life. I felt ‘called’ by this spirit of love to help a world in need.*

### *Epilogue*

Ben goes on to say that the presence did not last. And when it left, he felt as if abandoned; yet he was confused because he was certain that this spirit didn't will him any harm; yet he was unaware of what he must have done wrong for it to leave. He says he distinctly remembered feeling like a child in a playground as the schoolyard bully looked at him with a sinister smile mocking him in the absence of a protective parent as he said, “Now who's going to protect you?” He ran. He ran back to whatever seemed familiar and offered some stability. And he ran back to all the coping mechanisms he had used before to block out his fear of the spirit of that bully who represented the coldly indifferent “real” world, because he didn't know how to hold on to that spirit of love who had so infused a sense of life in him. And the strange thing was that despite this feeling of separation, he had no doubt that love itself did not and had never failed him. The experience indelibly stamped itself on his life in a way that reoriented his life as a search

for how to restore that relationship. From that point on, he kept looking for some individual(s) or community that might provide a more tangible connection to that spirit.

## Analysis

Ben's experience, at its start, may best be compared to the state of a child that has internalized the "bad object" (Winnicott, 1965). Specifically, Ben has suffered trauma at the hands of unreliable parents, resulting in pathological fear of separation and abandonment, as well as a related lack of differentiation (sense of self). He has learned (albeit incorrectly) that others cannot be relied upon for support and love, and that attachments are dangerous. In this state, he is highly susceptible to the influence of his instructor, and upon hearing that his current state is "permanent," understandably falls into a state of hopelessness and despair. And yet, after this experience, something profoundly changed in Ben at his core: the realization that there *is* hope. There is meaning, purpose, and value for his life as well as for human life.

### *The Drive: Collecting Data In-Vivo*

On his drive, Ben experiences a relatively common type of experience that he's experienced before (other sunrises and sunsets). However, unlike past experiences, on this occasion Ben connects it to other, similar experiences (the inmates listening to the aria). Specifically, Ben reports having a "moment of greater clarity" regarding the concept of gratitude that he had not previously experienced as clearly. In this moment, Ben has gained greater clarity not by virtue of this transcendent experience alone, but by observing something shared and offering itself to him through the mediation of these otherwise disparate experiences.

Importantly, this moment of clarity, while seemingly extraordinary, is better thought of as the final *ordinary* experience in a string of other ordinary experiences over time. Although Ben was not knowingly or explicitly performing an experiment, he still inadvertently collected data over time that resulted in this one experience finally leading him to a new state of knowing: he now *understood* a concept that he had previously not known as deeply. In particular, the assumed knowledge he possessed – based not only on the data point provided by his unreliable parents, but

on subsequent data points as he increasingly discovered a real spirit of cold-indifference in his broader world – was replaced by new knowledge based on a very different set of data. At this point, Ben now knows (even if not completely or fully) what the object of his gratitude is. Future experiences will undoubtedly refine and hone this understanding, but he will never not know it again: this knowledge, once obtained, is permanent.

### *Into the Desert: Practices for Learning*

Despite the momentary and specific nature of Ben's experience during his drive, what is most notable is Ben's shift toward a more active role in his moral development. Specifically, Ben reports the explicit awareness of a barrier to his knowledge based largely in the "cold and indifferent world" he perceived around him. Importantly, Ben indicates that this barrier is not merely self-generated, but also a product of the perceived prejudices surrounding him that suggest ideas of morality and goodness are not only false, but should be actively avoided. In this moment, Ben appears to be experiencing the profound power of an appeal to consensus, much like scientists who were historically berated for suggesting alternatives to a popular belief.

The question, then, becomes: how might Ben find the answers to such moral questions in the midst of personal experience, the experience of others, and popular beliefs that may be held based on experience but could just as easily be based in blind faith devoid of real data? To answer this, Ben instinctively turns back to a process of reasoned inquiry: what Dallas Willard and others termed the "spiritual disciplines" (Bernoulli *et al.*, 1960; Willard, 1988). These disciplines, when examined closely, are no different from the scientific processes used in any current research; they are simply specific versions tailored for the exploration of investigating these questions of morality and meaning.

Upon utilizing these disciplines, Ben discovers that he is able to obtain more information and increased clarity regarding concepts of love. He reports that these experiences are reliable and consistent, and that he is even able to better articulate how the prior "opposite" experience of loneliness and despair fits in to a larger model: that these experiences



were consistent in those individuals who had experienced trauma, specifically trauma related to a lack of meaningful, love-based connections. Additionally, he begins to observe that this trauma, and its associated negative effects on his present life, only remain when he “forgets” the new knowledge that he has obtained (but not yet fully integrated).

In this moment, Ben has taken the principles first hinted at during his experience of “gratitude” and generalized them into an exploration of all moral knowledge. Put another way, he sensed an experiential process underlying the very meaning of a good education – a process of experiential insight development as applicable to an ethical life as it is to any other object. And he sensed the same “law of love,” as he called it, underlying both an unhealthy and healthy development: that we are formed by the intimacy of our relationships.

One of the core difficulties for Ben revolved around his mentioned ambivalence about the way he was attempting to engage with this good object. Above all, as per Buber’s distinction between I/It and I/Thou (1970), Ben sensed that in this case the object in question was not a thing like a rock that can be owned, possessed, or controlled. Rather, it was relational, akin to meeting a person of unique value who was free to choose whether they wanted to relate to Ben in a given moment, but still loved him regardless of the momentary engagement. By engaging in the “spiritual disciplines”, Ben was better able to prepare himself to observe and experience those moments of intimacy, love, reliability, and gratitude that he previously missed.

### *The Moment of Meeting: The Eureka Effect*

In human experience, the Eureka Effect (also referred to as an epiphany) is characterized by the sudden coalescing of information into a comprehensive understanding that the individual previously did not possess. For Ben the understanding in question was experiential rather than intellectual (Bergson, 1912; Wyner, 1988), similar to a child’s knowledge that his mother loves him despite knowing little about her history. It was tangible and personal while also having an intangible, transcendent quality: the “love” portion of the experience was not limited to the specific experience of the sunset

any more than the child’s experience of love is specific to a single hug or kiss. Instead, it seemed to Ben to emanate from a source behind them all. Ben indicated, for example, that he was reminded of the words he had read by the sincere, insightful witnesses of this spirit of love throughout human history. Indeed, these words seemed to serve as an empirical foundation for Ben’s epiphany, further illuminating his past experiences. It was pure – even perfect in that Ben felt no admixture of darkness or moral compromise as in ordinary human life. Indeed, its nature seemed to Ben literally incapable of intending or doing harm. It seemed completely reliable or trustworthy.

Ben described this “experience of God” as “supra-personal” – it did not feel specifically male or female, but rather both and more: as if having the best of feminine and masculine qualities. It felt capable of a form of empathic and compassionate mutuality while remaining non-mutual as the source of all the good he or we received. It also felt non-judgmental – lacking harsh criticism, not to be confused with lacking judgment. Ben described this inner voice as being able, in the moment, to judge past actions as right and wrong without simultaneously condemning or rejecting himself. It felt similar to a healthy collaborative therapeutic relationship within which Ben felt able to look at his own misdeeds to better understand their nature and their origin, both in himself and in the world around him.

Of particular note is Ben’s description of this “powerful presence” as it related to “evil”: that “evil” was parasitic on the good. It could only work by distorting or in some other way concealing that good from more fully revealing itself. In short, Ben’s experience highlighted the extent to which evil was precisely a product of our human ability to distance and defend ourselves from goodness and rightness. That our defenses exist largely to allow us to mitigate the pain of unbearable affect in response to inherited prejudices and their associated destructive actions.

Above all, Ben felt something akin to a child-like sense of wonder or beginner’s mind that revealed a Reality greater than our tendency to equate the current state of a coldly indifferent humanity with reality itself. This Reality seemed to offer infinite possibilities for realization. Reality revealed itself to Ben as a living and ethical force and, as such, altered Ben’s prior



assumptions about existential questions such as meaning and death. He felt liberated or free in a new sense: not the “freedom” of omnipotence, but rather a freedom grounded in the experience of being in a value permeated universe. Like a child that stops acting out once he knows the rules of the play yard, Ben described a freedom to “love and do as you will” (Augustine, as cited in Ramsey, 2008) or Plato’s claim that the truly just person is a law unto herself (Plato, 1875a). For the first time he realized that knowingly doing something wrong would stain his own conscience – that it would, in a sense, harm himself even more than those who might suffer from his actions. He recognized that the one law limiting human freedom was the same law that liberated it in the highest degree: a law of love such that what we most love we become like.

## Discussion

Ben’s case highlights the process by which any individual can increasingly learn and understand moral truths through experimentation and discipline. Specifically, Ben uses the fundamental principles of all scientific inquiry – namely reproducibility and consistency – to gain greater and greater knowledge of these psychological and moral truths over time. The importance of this process cannot be understated: “if these principles can indeed be applied to issues such as morality and spirituality, then these concepts cannot remain in the realm of mere subjectivity. Critically, this does not mean that, therefore, one should, or even can, have a complete and total understanding of these issues” (Stolorow *et al.*, 2002, p. 108). Indeed, we suggest that the conceit of such total knowledge in many modern religions is precisely why there has been such a pushback to the opposite extreme in recent years.

Rather, as stated earlier, this knowledge lies on a spectrum that we can analyze and work with. This framework allows for a simultaneous freedom in acknowledging what we do not know and a responsibility in acknowledging what we do. The function, then, of the “spiritual disciplines” is to place the individual in the proper position to engage with those experiences when they occur again, akin to any other experimental setup. Without them, individuals consistently “miss” these occurrences, and then claim that they do not occur.

## Experiential Realism

Many often claim that we can never really know the answer to the most fundamental philosophical questions of human life. At the same time, humanity recognizes the need to assume answers to these questions in order to function. For example, psychologists increasingly recognize the importance of empathic connections (such as secure parent-child attachments and client-therapist relationships) in personal development and client prognosis, and as a society we take for granted that close connections, grounded in compassion, are superior to those grounded in lies or deceit. Counter-arguments typically still assume these basic tenants, instead disagreeing on *why*, not whether, these things are true (e.g., “compassion is preferable to deceit because it’s biologically advantageous”). In short, these disagreements are typically regarding how one gets to the answer, not the answer itself. In view of this, it may be important to ask: is this supposed disagreement perhaps just one more prejudice, related more to a distaste for the answer than to a real question?

In the same way that any physical phenomenon can be considered “known” if repeated testing proves consistent and reliable; so too can the psychological and philosophical questions be known. In a secure parent-child attachment, the child knows parental love because it is sampled by the child reliably and consistently. This is not a simulation of love, it is an authentic, real experience that leads to new knowledge (knowing) by the child. Similarly, as adults we can test questions of morality, spirituality, love, God, and so on, and come to understand (know) better what is true and what is false.

Importantly, this knowledge (and any knowledge) is not absolute: like virtually every other form of health, we must recognize the importance of continuums: there is always more to know. The distinction here is simply that, even if one doesn’t know everything, it does not follow that they therefore know nothing. By learning more, we can recognize the extent to which we do know or are “on the right track!”

## Exceptional vs Common Experiences

In books like William James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) or Sorokin’s, *Ways and Power*



of Love (1954); Bucke's, *Cosmic Consciousness* (1901), or Maslow's works on the peak experiences of self-actualizing individuals (1971) we encounter experiences that tend to be exceptions to normal or common experience, such as the enlightenment experiences of the various Buddhas or the remarkable experiences of various yogis. These experiences often lead those without them to assume they must either be hallucinations ("I didn't experience it, so something must be wrong with them") or exceptions that belong only to the individual ("Maybe it's true for *him*, but it doesn't apply to me").

In reality, these experiences are better considered simply as extremes at the far ends of the experiential spectrum. The astronaut may see a view of the Earth that solidifies their knowledge of it's roundness more clearly than standing atop even Mount Everest, yet the Earth's roundness is still true and knowable. The mountain climber seeing that curved horizon and photos may never have the same immersive experience as that astronaut, but it does not follow that she therefore "doesn't really know" that the Earth is round. Instead, the climber integrates her own experience with the astronaut's report, resulting in, at a minimum, *reasoned, informed faith* in the Earth's roundness: neither not-knowing, nor blind faith.

### *Spiritual Perfection and Psycho-Spiritual Health*

One of the central themes of this study is to transcend mere transient states of health, instead working toward a model of enduring psycho-spiritual health that is both universal and realistic. The most common question regarding any use of the word "perfection" typically revolves around the practical question: "Is there such a thing?" It is one thing to idealistically and unrealistically raise the bar for personal development or realization in a way that can only lead to shame or humiliation, but it is quite another to point to a real possibility of living in a way that actually fulfills both individual and collective needs. Much like Carl Rogers' concept of "congruence" (1961, p. 282), the goal here is not to create an idealized, unrealistic state that we can never reach (thus leading to failure, demoralization, and despair), but rather a state where, to borrow from Rogers, our values become the underlying source for all decision-making (Rogers, 1961, p. 400). The external

world and its arbitrary biases are replaced by our own increasingly nuanced, experientially-based values that, once learned, can never be forgotten.

Unlike Rogers, we suggest that this internal process is not merely "self generated," but rather possesses universal, transpersonal characteristics that can be evaluated and tested methodologically through both individual and group (social) experience. In the same way that we may recognize the universality of negative traits, such as the "emptiness" of severe personality disorder, here we claim the positive ones are universal as well. Specifically, we suggest that these underlying traits of love, goodness, and interpersonal connection are vital to psycho-spiritual health and increasingly ignored and even actively denied in modern Western society. And, most ironically, we suggest that the counterargument to these traits – that they are mere subjective manifestations without experimental validity – is precisely a blind-faith, subjective argument that ignores the existing data and instead relies on mere confirmation bias.

### *Implications for Addiction Treatment*

The growing body of empirical evidence regarding addiction increasingly demonstrates the vital importance of unmet needs in addiction. The now-famous "Rat Park" experiments (Alexander, 1981), for example, suggested early on that even in animals, social interaction and community play a key part in continued drug use. This does not in any way undermine the real genetic and biological influences on addiction, but rather clarifies the various roles that each might play. Specifically, while genetic traits appear to strongly influence *which* drugs an individual prefers (Foll, 2009), how an addiction is expressed is distinct from whether it is expressed in the first place. Instead, the empirical evidence increasingly suggests that addiction is triggered by deep, unmet relational needs (Khantzian, 1997). Specifically, addiction appears directly tied to an individual's attempt to temporarily relieve severe suffering and distress, with biology influencing which drugs are selected in that moment.

The clinical significance, then, lies in the importance of understanding that, at it's core, addiction is about spiritual suffering, not chemical imbalance. It is a defense against the



despair of these unmet needs. In this context, non-chemical addictions also become easier to understand. Gambling, food, exercise – even our jobs – can be addictive depending upon the Pocket of Meaning (i.e., the relationship) the item has for the individual (Fetting, 2011). To put it another way, in the perceived absence of deep, meaningful relationships with others or oneself, the individual forms an artificial surrogate relationship with something else. Unlike a person, however, this artificial Pocket of Meaning fails to provide real spiritual nourishment, much like a candy bar. And without this nourishment, the individual slowly grows psychologically weaker and more ill.

Often in these cases, one addiction is simply replaced with another. This harm-reduction model may be an excellent first step: for chronic physical pain, replacing heroin with a less-risky opioid such as buprenorphine may be the difference between life and death. Once this transition has taken place, however, physicians acknowledge the need to discover the underlying causes of the patient's pain and treat this directly, if possible, with the goal of eventually weaning them from opioids entirely. So, too, should our field not limit our work to mere "addiction swapping", but, instead, move toward helping clients transition from these temporary, artificial relationships to meaningful ones with both other humans and, more importantly, a universal spiritual framework that underlies all of humanity.

### *Possibility of Human Fulfillment*

One of the more controversial claims made here is that it is possible for humans to attain a state of fulfillment. More specifically, we are appealing to a specific type of moral and ethical experience akin to Thomas More's claim, "I think none evil. I do none evil" as per the film, *A Man for All Seasons*, or the last confession of James Nayler, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Quaker, to a spirit in him that thinks no evil (1829). This is based on the actual experiences reported by others, consistently throughout our collective history, not simply the single experience of a single author. As in Ben's example, this experience is consistently described as a connection with "good" and "beauty" that leads to more stable, intimate relationships with both the "good" itself and other people as a result. Importantly, this experience is testable and repeatable: those who have such experiences do not report a result of disconnection, a sense of

isolation, or feelings of meaninglessness and despair (except, possibly, in response to the loss of this experience later).

Those who do engage in the discipline of internalizing this relationship/spirit/morality consistently demonstrate a unique freedom and liberation: they more fully understand the real, long-term consequences of their choices and can better navigate their worlds in a way that, not only regularly and consistently leads to satisfaction, but also improves the lives of those around them. Their behavior is distinguished from those who simply "do as they please" which, interestingly, is uniformly categorized as pathological in all therapeutic models (even those that categorically deny the existence of moral codes).

Ben's experience also provides a sense of the fundamental problem faced in these experiences: unlike other forms of experimentation, experiences of love are less tangible and more difficult to measure. However, it is important not to conflate one's difficulty measuring a specific phenomenon with its fundamental existence. In physics we typically give experimenters far more leeway, often accepting similarly unmeasured phenomena as "fact" with far less empirical evidence. This seems, perhaps, directly related to their impact upon our lives: we have less at stake if the physicist is proved wrong. In short, our desire for omnipotence – to do what we want without feeling beholden to these moral truths, leads us to a place of confirmation bias, whereby, despite overwhelming experiential evidence to the contrary, we cherry-pick small data points that "prove" the non-existence of this universal spirit (which, we also acknowledge, intellectually, is not even a logically valid proposition).

What, then, is necessary for realizing and maintaining a good spiritual life? History has taught us that any dogmatic adherence to spiritual disciplines typically leads to serious, often fatal consequences. Religious wars dominate our history books, with followers of every major religion loudly proclaiming the need to "kill the infidels." The problem, though, is not the disciplines themselves, but rather the use of them in the absence of any real intent: to forget that they serve only as a first step in the pursuit of knowledge, rather than the end goal. Much like the astronomer that sets up her telescope but forgets to actually look through it and record her



findings, the disciplines act as an instrument rather than the destination. These disciplines transcend any specific religion, and can be found even in secular circles (e.g., mindfulness practices).

This is synonymous with the process therapists often describe as “bibliotherapy,” whereby a patient is encouraged to utilize the experiences of others in addition to their own. The goal, of course, is not simply to read the words on the page, but to engage with the material and integrate it into their own understanding and with their own (often limited) experience. Similarly, the therapeutic relationship, albeit not necessary, and certainly not sufficient, may serve as an instrument for change insofar as both therapist and client collaboratively engage in the therapeutic process toward the goal of realizing long-term, meaningful change. In short, we argue that the ethical bar must be raised for the field of psychotherapy and, for that matter, all of contemporary human life: that the emphasis should be placed on larger spiritual goals.

### *Clinical Significance of Such a State*

Clinically speaking, no one can avoid a faith commitment: we cannot know everything, yet we cannot act if we claim we know virtually nothing. Instead, psycho-spiritual health stems from utilizing our collective experiences to take a reasoned, educated stance regarding ethical and moral issues. As research increasingly suggests, there are real answers to these questions, not simply subjective, random opinions, and that the lack of an explicit stance regarding these issues in mainstream research is highly problematic and not limited to a mere “religious problem” (Lear, 2006; Orange, 2016). As demonstrated in Ben’s case, there is a relatively clear and growing sense in which individuals who come to therapy for help dealing with such ethical, moral or spiritual concerns are unable to come to terms with them insofar as therapists are prejudiced with respect to them (e.g., dismiss or evade such issues as pathological or, rather, implicitly or explicitly impose their own moral biases). This is not meant to isolate the problem to psychotherapy nor elevate therapists above others: for example, how politicians, celebrities, and athletes live and relate certainly impacts the social context in which we all live. Rather, we suggest that the moral codes we all implicitly acknowledge and

have some (albeit often limited) access to be made more explicit: that we willingly explore them as something worth discovering rather than deny our own experience to our detriment.

### *A Note of Caution*

In one form or another the greatest philosophers, religious prophets, artists, and psychologists in our history appeal to the power of love in the sense of goodness as the cure of our maladies (Plato, 1875b; Sorokin, 1954; Bettelheim, 1960; Frankl, 1992; Maslow, 1999). The list is endless. Of course, what each of them may mean by “love” may be very different: Freud’s claim that “psychoanalysis is a cure through love” (McGuire, 1974; Bettelheim, 1982), for example, may have a very different meaning than John the apostle’s appeal to a Christ of love. A phenomenologically-descriptive account of what one means by such an appeal, along with an elucidation of what it is about love that makes or might make it clinically effectual, would enable us to distinguish these varying conceptions.

For example, we are *not* claiming love is curative insofar as love is reduced to a mere subjective feeling divorced from the nature and existence of the object loved. We are claiming love is curative in the sense of the universally held “thesis of the practicality of reason,” that is, the Socratic-Platonic appeal to the power of knowledge over human life where “knowledge” is understood as experiential knowledge or an actual intimate relationship to its object such that to know X implies X exists. Moreover, our appeal is not just to any object but to an objective moral or ethical value applicable to reality itself, or what the early Greek philosophers referred to as “The Good” that underlies all our appeals to faith in true goodness. Further still, our claim is that this Good has a personal or transpersonal or supra-personal dimension in that it is incapable of thinking (willfully intending) much less doing evil and is capable of a form of forgiveness or reconciliation that is consistent with, rather than opposed to, an objective moral law or karma.

As such the root of its curative power is *not* in the mere subjectivity (beliefs or opinions, feelings or preferences etc.) of any individual; nor is it rooted in appeals to the mere prejudices or convictions of any intersubjective group or even current human collective. Rather, it is rooted in existence itself and our unique capacity to



actually relate to it in a way to increasingly and experientially know it's essential nature as it really is. In other words, the appeal to the curative power of love is an appeal to a self-transcendent reality incarnated, manifested, or immanent in all its variety of concreteness, which is unique to human life in virtue of our moral capacity to either collaborate with it or to block out its influence in order to do what we please. Insofar as we do choose to make this relationship the core relationship of our lives, it makes us increasingly able to be empathically loving toward both ourselves and others. The appeal to the curative power of love, therefore, is an appeal to a complex whole that includes, not only its object, the Good, and not only our relationships to one another, but also elements of freedom of will or intentional action, faith, knowledge, feeling or affect, and behavior rather than assuming any inherent opposition or separation between these elements. We can and must distinguish the role each plays without separating them.

In more collective terms, our claim is that by virtue of human freedom and responsibility, in conjunction with our finitude of knowledge, we have a moral capacity to both collaboratively realize a form of moral evolution or progressive "providential" revelation and process of redemption leading to the incarnation of such a Good in us as individuals and a collective having power to transform our material world. But this same capacity also gives us the correlative capacity (not necessity!) to oppose the constraining influence of this Good in a way that necessarily results first in indelibly staining our own conscience and extending outwardly to inflict suffering on others and our natural world, which is something we increasingly observe in our world today.

The cure to this growing malady, therefore, is love in the sense of choosing (akin to the people of Ninevah in response to the warning of the prophet Jonah) individually and collectively to more intimately embrace that source of power which, in the nature of the case, necessarily works by an inviolable moral law to reform and transform human nature from the inside out. Through this developmental process, the power of love works at the core of human life in a way that overcomes our addictions and all the ways we run from our fear of despair bound-up with our prejudices about reality being

governed by chaos or, rather, cold-indifference. And this includes our fear that there really is or may be a moral law and real consequences that none of us can avoid even by what we call death.

The power or clinical significance of such extraordinary experiences as Ben's, and the role such experiences play in a moral developmental process, then, lies not in a sense of extraordinary akin to certain views of the miraculous that are or seem divorced from the capacities of each and all of us. Rather, it lies in the sense that such experiences are the natural product of being oriented toward and actually engaged in a moral development process involving more common moral experiences of grace akin to Ben's experience of the sunrise. In other words, the extraordinary cases work to inform our more common or familiar experiences just like the way more extraordinary traumatic experiences inform less traumatic ones rather than being divorced from one another. In such cases it is not that our traumatic experiences disappear, but that they can become less significant or less powerful – *not* by virtue of any mere passage of time (Amery, 1980, pp. 62ff) that can allegedly heal all wounds, but by means of an evolving intimate relationship with a spirit of love having power to truly reconcile us to what is true and best in ourselves and one another within the context of an ever-expanding ethical life.

One is likely to wonder, how does such an appeal to a universal moral law make sense of the unjust suffering of the innocent and the just among us? Our position is, first, that we do have experiential access to such a moral law and, as such, have reason to believe in real and immediate moral consequences to the perpetrator in a sense not suffered by their victims. We have experiential access to the necessity of a process of genuine forgiveness and reconciliation in order for there to be any possibility of any form of genuine self-actualization or true peace. And our position is, second, that the only thing that would then make us question such a moral law is our collectively held assumption that the material life we live is the only life there is. And we might at least ask ourselves whether this is anything more than a mere prejudice that reduces reality to material reality when we already have ample evidence that the former is so much more.

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